

RE-DEMATERIALIZATION

THINGS THAT DISAPPEAR, THEN REAPPEAR AGAIN

Dieter Roelstraete Ponders the Work of Joe Scanlan

Each of us at any moment and at any level may be traded off – without the notion of exchange, we can have no serious insight into the social structure.

*Jacques Lacan*¹

The movement of artworks must be at a standstill and thereby become visible.

*Theodor Adorno*²

Prelude: Sameness and Civilization³

Half a year ago I decided to treat myself to a four-month (“junior”) sabbatical in the Western Canadian city of Vancouver, a place that, from an inevitably Eurocentric point of view, cannot be thought to exist otherwise than on the proverbial edge of the world; it is, quite literally, far away from anything and everything. [So much for the ‘global village’ rhetoric: what village exactly do these rhetoricians have in mind?]

This so-called “terminal city”—a term used rather endearingly by the locals themselves—is where the current essay on the work of American artist Joe Scanlan was primarily researched and written; a drastic change of decor, indeed, from my work station in Brussels (“Vika Persbo”) where my various writings habitually come into being.

Why Vancouver? The reasons for my being here are primarily personal in nature (though I do admit to being slightly enamored with the idea of remoteness and its therapeutic overtones, too), that is to say they are related to *romance*—and to the desire for the various comforts, luxuries and securities of “home life” (settling) which romance optimistically instills in us. So yes, here I am, flying into Vancouver, a parody of so-called nomadic life—the tirelessly romanticized staple of any curatorial diet—deciding to sort-of get settled (“cease from migration and adopt a fixed abode”). Now what does the newly arrived (if temporary) settler *do* to usher in the ritual of habitation? How does one claim and “make” living space? Exactly: he or she goes shopping—to *IKEA*. There are two *IKEA* stores located in the suburban sprawl that surrounds Vancouver—but of course both the communities of Coquitlam and Richmond will balk at this

description. Which inevitably prompts the question *why* IKEA stores generally spring up in the far reaches of suburbia, where ‘burbs morph into sizeable cities in their own right.

IKEA is one of a handful of branding phenomena which lend genuine credibility to the phrase “global village” in that their sheer ubiquity really make the world feel like a village, namely a place that pretty much can be taken in in a single glance—and “where everybody knows your name.” Here I am, a long, long way from home—but sure enough, there is always an IKEA store around the corner to make me feel “at home,” or, better still, to enable me to *reproduce* and *replicate* home-away-from-home. IKEA outlet stores are pretty much to be found everywhere around the world (now counting well over 200 units in 30 different countries), and much like Nike or the likes of Coca-Cola, Hennes & Mauritz, McDonald’s or Starbucks, their presence in these various countries and continents—the appearance of a *logo* more than of anything else: these corporate brands’ overpowering *visual* presence surely allow us to look at the concept of “logocentrism” in a wholly new way⁴—has come to signify, rather cliché-like, the pervasive success of global capitalism in covering the earth’s surface with the triumphal banners of consumer culture. It is this global *visual* presence—legions of logos, littered across the planetary archipelago of strip malls—and the concurring global dissemination of its *representations*, which of course also help produce the distinct experience of “sameness” that has become one of the hallmarks of globalization: the fact that, wherever we may go—no matter how far away from “home”—we are always immediately immersed in a landscape of staggeringly familiar sameness. Where once venturing out into the great wide open virtually ensured us of an encounter with Difference and Otherness (why else would we bother leaving the green grass of home in the first place?), we are now more likely to enter a world of unique monotony and predictability, razed and leveled by the globally resounding dictates of commerce. Civilization demands and in turn engenders sameness.

Sure enough, it is mighty wonderful that wherever I decide to settle down—that is, in one of those thirty countries, but who really wants to live anywhere else?—there is an IKEA catalogue at hand to help me recreate the illusory cocoon of home; at the same time, however, there is also something distinctly depressing about the fact that, after having visited the local IKEA store, I will be coming home to the more-or-less exact same interior as that of my neighbor or the newly married couple just down the block. *Why* do we hate being recognized in these shopping centers, especially by our neighbors or other people we dream of differing from? Because we hate waking up to the realization that the soothing ritual of shopping, so often performed in a dream-like state of obliviousness to the leveling effects of consumption, does *not* produce the much sought-after “cultural” distinction from “other” consumers which we assume

the very act of shopping will secure for us: we *hate* being caught buying the same sofa, the same set of chairs, the same framed reproduction of Matisse's *La Danse*. I sure hated rushing out of that Richmond, B.C. store amid a sizeable armada of co-consumers sporting sunny dispositions and pushing overburdened carts, knowing that that night, just like any other IKEA customer, I would be cursing myself for having to assemble my Billy bookcase all by myself... Now this is all the more significant, of course, because the allure of consumer capitalism is predicated precisely on *la promesse de bonheur* that is implied in the fantasy of difference—the assurance that, through buying certain goods, you can distinguish yourself from the anonymous mass of consumers, “be yourself” as “someone else”—and there is no one brand that speaks more convincingly about the promise of differentiation and distinction (in the admittedly crude sense that “my pad looks different from yours, therefore I am free”) than IKEA. In fact, it is probably here that one should look for an “explanation” to the remarkable success of the Scandinavian superstore as a primarily *sociological* and *cultural* phenomenon; the founder of the prefab living behemoth, 80-year old Ingvar Kamprad, is currently the *fourth richest person in the world*—sufficient proof, indeed, that Kamprad's vision of affordable living has definitely tapped in on a globally felt desire in ways that should rightfully shame the likes of Phil Knight, E. Neville Isdell and Jim Skinner⁵. A desire for difference and distinction—to which IKEA has responded with the largely illusory phantasm of self-realization and self-empowerment through interior design, with the pre-packaged utopia of affordable, environmentally sound—and above all (or so it thinks of itself) aesthetically pleasing—“life style”. Indeed, not only does IKEA offer us a “life style” or customizable “style of self,” it also provides (again, much more so than its many competitors in the arena of multinational corporations) a strongly defined *aesthetic* of sorts—indebted, of course, to the mighty legacy of Scandinavian design – and an equally brand-specific “ethic” that seems to be woven into the tissue of IKEA produce itself. Taken together, IKEA thus proposes an art of living that in many ways seems anathema to the extravagant ways of global capitalism, and much more close in spirit to the utopian thrust of that handful of modernist avant-gardes that called for the submersion of art into life, for the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art, and thus inevitably also for the dissolution and disappearance of art, as an autonomous realm of human practice, “into idea, design, or everyday life.” Socialism, as a political project of social engineering, may have had its day, its charred remains still smoldering in the ruins of various (German, Russian) experiments in communal living, but the shadow of its artful beginnings in the artists' and writers' colonies of turn-of-the-century Bohemian Mitteleuropa continues to roam, rather perversely I would say, IKEA's one-way shopping trails: it seems fair to assume that IKEA's (commercial *and* cultural)

success at pursuing the quintessentially modernist dream of wedding art and life into a seamless *Gesamtkunstwerk* of “populist” design would make the members of the Bauhaus, the Russian Constructivists, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Wiener Werkstätte groan with envious embarrassment. A “requiem for communism”⁶ can be heard humming through the bowels of every yellow-blue-clad windowless box store around the world—and should one hum along with it?

Consider the following quote by Ingvar Kamprad, culled from *Pay For Your Pleasure (reprise)*, Joe Scanlan’s follow-up to Mike Kelley’s well-known piece of the same name: “Once and for all we have decided to side with the many... What we want, we can still do. Together. A glorious future!”⁷ A soundbite straight out of the revolutionary songbook, it smacks of many a KOMFUT, LEF or UNOVIS battle-cry.⁸

Ever since Karl Marx decided to apply the Hegelian scheme of dialectics to the astute workings of the emerging capitalist world order, we have come to understand the centrality of *perversion* to the “art” of capitalism. The success story of IKEA, in no small way achieved thanks to cunningly aggressive marketing methods, is such an emblem of perversion—a classic example of the insidious ways in which commodity capitalism succeeds at conscripting those very forces that seek to contradict or transcend it. Fortunately enough, however, capitalism also produces (and will forever continue to produce) its own inner inconsistencies and contradictions—and it is in the “temporary autonomous zone” of such an inconsistency, i.e. in the “free zones” it simply *has* to generate in order for the masses to believe they are spoilt for consumer choices, that art can emerge, exist and flourish—most notably (as was first made clear by Marcel Duchamp and his tactics of the readymade) by “taking back” from consumer society that which capitalism itself had embezzled from the realm of cultural production—say, design. Joe Scanlan is the consummate practitioner of this art of “taking back”, of what Michel de Certeau has called an art of “poaching”⁹; armed with his trademark AK-47, we encounter him, “poaching” his way through the intricately laid-out IKEA labyrinth—yes, for the shortest time it looked like a perfectly innocent *shopping* spree—intent on subverting the Order of Things to which the dictates of commerce have condemned our daily lives to conform.

I. The Art of Manoeuvre

The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends—what do they make of what they “absorb,” receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?

*Michel de Certeau*¹⁰

I've allowed myself this lengthy, partly anecdotal digression recounting the IKEA experience—and revisiting its 'political' overtones—for a variety of reasons, all of which will now lead us back to the work of Joe Scanlan. My account speaks of commerce and consumer culture, both of which in some sense define the theoretical horizon of Scanlan's practice as a critically minded artist¹¹; it speaks of design as an integral part of both commodity capitalism and the revolutionary programs of early modernism, to which much of Scanlan's thinking is clearly indebted¹²; finally, it also speaks, clearly and squarely, of *furniture* – and “furniture,” to be sure, seems to be Joe Scanlan's idiom or medium of choice, a choice that is obviously meant to complicate the very idea of the medium and of modernism's stringent adherence to medium-specificity as a way to secure the artwork's (or, more generally, art's) autonomy and its consequent opposition to considerations of the work's possible use value. These three distinct areas of interest intersect quasi-exemplarily in what may well be considered Joe Scanlan's most paradigmatic work to date, a “sculpture” that actively employs one of IKEA's most iconic (if somewhat pedestrian) fixtures, the world-renowned “Billy” bookcase.¹³ In this work, prosaically called *DIY*, some of the artist's major preoccupations intertwine to produce a momentous piece of “work,” the critical topicality of which bears down on a particularly wide range of themes both narrowly artistic (aesthetic) and broadly cultural (political).

DIY was originally conceived for the exhibition *Waste Management*, held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1999; within the context of that exhibition, the project emphatically addressed issues concerning consumption and consumer culture, recycling and “waste management,” and showed the artist's considerable skill at transforming a generic IKEA bookcase (along with all sorts of IKEA trinkets), into a bona fide coffin, complete with adjoining columns and vases containing chrysanthema, making the gallery space in which the coffin was installed look much like a funeral parlor waiting for business to arrive. In a frame hung on the gallery wall, a small drawing presented a diverse array of elaborate coffin forms from different parts of the world: how to unearth the lugubrious truth lodged deep inside a common commodity and make a cheapskate staple of global design into a display case for showing off dead bodies.

[But whose exactly?] The idea of these forms being indigenous and therefore somehow emblematic of their origins was later expanded into a step-by-step how-to guide with the explanatory title *DIY or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for Under \$399*, published by Imschoot, uitgevers, thus freeing the *Waste Management* project from the shackles of “authorship”—one object made by one artist—and allowing the sinister knowledge of *DIY* to travel freely across the globe. The cover of said book sported a glaringly blue-and-yellow *DIY* logo, further complicating the project’s guerrilla-style debunking of the established “self-made man” mythology of the Swedish flat-pack Leviathan. In an online comment that refers back to both de Certeau’s observations on the emancipation of consumer as user and the interlacing of the idea of design with that of the manifesto, Scanlan himself has noted that “DIY is a shopping guide, a manifesto for how to get what you want from the world of commerce rather than accepting what it wants you to have, an epic tale about the transformation of mundane merchandise into a transcendental escape vehicle”—a vessel, it is herewith insinuated, that will secure our escape from the prison house of consumer/commodity capitalism, in which the one-dimensional relationship between “object” and “use” reigns defiantly supreme, *while simultaneously continuing to belong to it...* in the shape of an IKEA bookcase.¹⁴

Interestingly, to ‘animate’ the rather stark format of the assembly manual, Scanlan recruited the improbable-seeming assistance of another “artwork,” namely AnnLee, the Manga figure acquired by French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parenno in 1999 to operate as the lead character in the much-lauded collaborative *No Ghost, Just a Shell* project. However, the figure really only appears five times throughout the *DIY* book, twice to make a phone call ordering flowers for the ‘funeral’; the expression of suicidal sadness on the Manga character’s perennially lackluster face is powerful enough to convince me into believing she (he?) is actually ordering flowers for her (his?) *own* funeral. Tellingly, the diptych of the AnnLee figure using a robust, slightly antiquated-looking mobile phone also reappears on the artist’s website www.thingsthatfall.com under the “Idols” header, with one panel sporting the title “Dial M for Murder” (oh, so this might not be AnnLee’s own funeral after all, but perhaps that of a hated Manga rival?), the other one simply called “Last Call”. On www.thingsthatfall.com, I come across an interview conducted by Ph.D. student Kristel Van Audenaeren in which she seems to impersonate (‘perform’) the Manga character; one passage contains the following sardonic exchange: “[AnnLee:] You seem to design objects with other people (or sometimes even “consumers”) in mind, other people who might use these objects. Did you immediately think that I could use a coffin made out of IKEA material? [Joe Scanlan:] Yes. You and IKEA were a match made in heaven, two peas in a pod. You were destined for each other.” Here, Scanlan

unwittingly paraphrases the Lacan quote with which I opened the current proceedings: “without the notion of exchange, we can have no serious insight into the social structure”; the rules of commerce (and its corollary demands of economizing) render all subjectivities, however ‘fictitious’, equally subject to the tyrant Law of Capital – that is, null and void as *subjectivities*. [AnnLee is the prototypic consumer, both a Kamprad *and* de Certeau dream come true; perhaps this is why Scanlan’s contribution to the *No Ghost Just a Shell* project can easily be singled out as its most poignantly ‘political’ moment.] Later in the same interview, when asked about the legal implications of the use to which the Manga character has been put in this particular project, Scanlan adds: “I pretty much surrendered my idea of you to your consumers. There were 2,000 copies of my book printed, which is by far the largest and most widely distributed example of you. And that’s not counting the possibility of the book being bootlegged. Anyone who has access to the information in the book is free to go to IKEA and, based on that information, make his or her own DIY coffin, which is basically a sculpture of mine. So at this point, I have no idea how many of ‘my’ sculptures are out there complicating the originality of the one I made, or how many copies of “you” are out there, complicating the originality of the 2,000 books I printed.” Here, beyond merely pointing out the possibility of emancipating or empowering the consumer (“anyone can make his or her own DIY coffin), Scanlan already touches upon a series of issues to which we will be turning shortly – that of the “problem” of originality in a practice that consciously seeks to obfuscate the disciplinary borders between authorship (“production”) and readership (“consumption”, “use”), between art and design or art object and commodity, sculpture and furniture, between the realm of autonomy and that of heteronomy; all of which are dialectical dyads that are necessarily implicated in the age-old (and only partially modernist) yearning to wed art to life – a “yearning” that is clearly present, however adversarial and iconoclastic, in the *DIY* project. {Of course, *DIY* is not so much ‘about’ wedding art to life or submerging life into art, as it is about art’s disappearance into the abysmal depth of death, about the art of *dying*—or, put yet another way, the *art of death* as the *death of art*. Which of course leads us back to the familiar Hegelian terrain of the purported “end of art”, a trope that has long been central to modernism’s obsession with self-effacement, to art’s ongoing obsession with its own disappearance.

One final remark concerning *DIY or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for Under \$399*.

More than any other project of Scanlan’s—with the telling exception, perhaps, of *Nesting Bookcases*, another piece that has inspired an impressive slew of art historical freewheeling¹⁵—*DIY* is concerned with producing a summary state of *autonomy*, however hypothetical or

potential, in the viewer as user; *DIY* urges the viewer, usually relegated to the dominion of mere consumption, to enter the realm of production: go to IKEA and “do it yourself.” Both this stance and the militancy of its incitement are in fact redoubled in much of Scanlan’s critical writing, both recent and less so, showing the question of the autonomy of the art object, and that of ‘art’ in general, to be a central concern to the artist’s practice. In an early piece of writing, published in the English art magazine *frieze* in 1998, Scanlan sung the praise of the AK-47 or “Kalashnikov”, still the most popular assault rifle in the world and widely known to be the most easily assembled (hence also most easily “done yourself”¹⁶); in a much more recent essay published in *Artforum* in 2005, Scanlan confronted the art world’s current infatuation with so-called “relational aesthetics” head on in a line of argument that took particular offense with relational aesthetics’ artful internalization of the logic of peer pressure as the governing principle of art production and consumption—in fact, the artist likens the inane business of relational aesthetics to that of *traffic*¹⁷—and the subtle strands of paternalism that pervade much of relational aesthetics’ socio-political assumptions with regards to audience participation and socialization. What Scanlan finds especially unsavory in relational aesthetics’ continuing obsession with the idea of ‘interaction’ or ‘relating’ is the fact that, as an artistic method or artistic goal, it often seems to presuppose (or even *demand*) the suspension of the viewer’s critical faculties—and hence also his or her ‘autonomy’—in a program of art making and art experiencing that in turn also forces the artwork itself to abandon its hallowed status as an autonomous entity or *Ding an sich*. In forcing the viewer, however innocuously (and Scanlan understands how this semblance of innocuousness has come to define the success of this particular type of art), to ‘relate’—to the artwork, to the artist, to the art world, to the rules that govern the social experience of ‘art’—relational aesthetics in fact helps to undo the very idea of autonomy that is so dearly central to the canonical, Kantian view of modernism (“I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of the self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant”¹⁸). Even though there are obviously sound enough reasons to propound such a ‘critique’ of the cult of autonomy—after all, much of modernism’s own zeal went into problematizing its own penchant towards autonomy and self-contained seclusion as a symptom of reification, of commodification even—Scanlan is right in noting that, sadly, much of relational aesthetics’ fervor to deconstruct the theatre of autonomy has in fact produced a disquieting amount of underwhelming socially engineered art. His own investigation, as both an artist and a critic or writer/thinker, of the autonomy of art, its blessings and shortcomings, seem to be directed not so much towards reclaiming the sanctity of the artist’s signature (and, concomitantly, *ownership* of the art object) or the sacrosanct Uselessness of the artwork—far from it, in fact—but much more towards

restoring the consumer-as-user to a degree of sovereignty and critical distancing that has become rare in today's art world, with its relentless promotion of immersion, participation and, ultimately, complicity in the cultural sphere as just another market place.¹⁹ This enabling of some degree of critical distance, of allowing the viewer to "do it him- or herself"—whether he or she finds him- or herself in the sphere of fine arts or in that of IKEA's brute commerce, or, more importantly still, in that huge, largely uncharted grey zone *in between* art and commerce that is the theatre of operations in so much of Joe Scanlan's work—is what I believe to be most urgently at stake in *DIY*.

II. The Acme of Skill

"If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus turn art against art. The totally objectified artwork would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectification it would regress to an impotently powerless subjective impulse and flounder in the empirical world."

Theodor Adorno²⁰

Let us head back to the artist's website www.thingsthatfall.com for a summary-description of the one project in which Joe Scanlan perhaps most defiantly challenges the art establishment's border police to produce an artwork that really *does* make sense as a piece of furniture—in this particular case, a shelving unit that would put even Kamprad's "Billy" to shame: "The *Nesting Bookcase* is an innovative product in that, unlike most shelving systems, it is neither a singular cumbersome unit nor a pile of parts that need to be assembled, IKEA-style. Rather, each of its solid-state shelves is free and slightly smaller than the next so as to be able to "nest" inside each other as one portable, suitcase-sized object. The handy carrying strap also doubles as a tension strap that holds the shelves securely in place when in use. The shelves can be stacked, ziggurat-style, to a height of six feet." Scanlan's riveting sales rap – the *Nesting Bookcases* come in at a sweet \$995 a piece – continues with the following jab directed at contemporary art's current infatuation with furniture design, which in many cases cannot be said to reach anywhere beyond the realm of the merely rhetorical: "Most artworks that venture into the realm of design necessarily retain some aspect of their art pedigree as a safeguard against becoming too ambiguous, too numerous, or too inexpensive." Indeed, the art world's persistent love affair

with commodity culture and the logic of mass production—a hereditary affliction, as it was already present in the art of many an avant-garde—has only very rarely resulted in the actual production-of actual commodities tailored for actual mass consumption; more often than not, these flirtations and overtures have contented themselves with a merely rhetorical appraisal of the world of mass-produced objects: no fearless hurling or diving headfirst into the ocean of commodities here, but rather tediously, prudishly dipping one’s toes to see if the water ain’t too cold. However, “the *Nesting Bookcase* is radical because it has ventured off the monitored playground of contemporary art and run the risk of being design—that is, of actually being used, loved, and destroyed”—photographs on the website, many of them ostensibly taken in people’s generally nondescript, cluttered homes, show the many uses to which the *Bookcases* have been put, quite a few of them rather unceremonious ones.²¹ Finally, in a paragraph that again recalls both the *DIY* project and de Certeau’s apology of the Consumer as a heroic Everyman, we are confronted with the million dollar question: “What is the *Nesting Bookcase*: Art? Design? Part object, part sculpture? We’re not sure and, frankly, we don’t care. Besides, it’s not really up to us. Our favorite thing about the *Nesting Bookcase* is its ambiguity. We like how an object that began as a rather clumsily built artwork has evolved into a complex network of possibilities, a kind of “open source” object whose function is still playing out in the hands of all persons involved. Most of all, we like how this flexible status and has created a social give and take that only commerce and word of mouth can resolve.” If this sounds like a manifesto, then that’s probably because the *Nesting Bookcases*—again, much like the *DIY* project and the line of custom-made coffins it helped to inaugurate²²—are too: what *DIY* “does” to the artist, to his signature and authorship, the *Nesting Bookcases* “do” to the artwork: simultaneously make it *disappear* as an autonomous, professionally circumscribed category, becoming a seemingly quotidian Design Within Reach object of great practical merit instead, and make it *reappear* again in Everyman’s home—as a *quintessential Joe Scanlan work of art*. Whereas *D.I.Y.* shrewdly outmaneuvers the likes of both IKEA and Bauhaus or Russian Constructivism in enabling Everyman to become an artist (or be the author of his/her own funeral) merely by purveying Scanlan’s manual, thus effectively ensuring *the disappearance of the artist*²³, *Nesting Bookcases* enacts *the disappearance of the artwork*—and, simultaneously, its reappearance as an object that can be “everything:” a shelving unit, a stool, a coffee table, a Tatlin tower, or (indeed, why on earth not?) an artwork.

Postscript: The Productivist Sublime

If the aesthetic is to realize itself it must pass over into the political, which is what it secretly always was.

*Terry Eagleton*²⁴

The utopian longing for this irreversible dissolution of artistic practice into the practice of everyday life was most consciously theorized and calibrated in the inter bellum avant-garde movements of the German Bauhaus and the Russian constructivists, whose vitalist zeal was largely defined by their (f)actual complicity in revolutionary political practice: whether they were effectively called upon to do so or whether they themselves “felt” this calling—by no means an insignificant nuance—these were all artists who fervently wanted to abandon the lofty realm of “pure art” (painting, sculpture) in favor of the so-called “applied arts” (architecture; costume, furniture and/or interior design; agitprop; social engineering) and in many cases also succeeded in doing so—even if it meant that, once their revolutionary fervor had died down, most of them were more or less forced to retreat back into the ivory towers of fine art; most of the Russian Constructivists prove a particularly painful, humiliating case in point.

In the tens and twenties, “modern” art and the artwork as we now know and understand it, went through its first process of evaporation in the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, without whom much of what we have discussed in the previous pages would not have made much sense, and in the Constructivist calls for an art of social transformation; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, art again disappeared, into ‘ideas’ and ‘concepts’, in a series of artistic practices that referenced both the legacy of Duchamp and Dada and that of the Russian Constructivists and Bauhaus; throughout the 1990s it seemed to be dissolving yet again into its love affair with (interior) design. In the work of Joe Scanlan, art disappears into both of these loopholes (concept and design)—only to reappear again in the artful marriage of idea and product, theory and practice, concept and execution, as a series of “commodities” and objects with a clearly defined use value that are also truly “conceptual” artworks. Indeed, in both the *Nesting Bookcases* and *-DIY*—as in the *Massachusetts Wedding Bed*, the *Coffins* and *Stores*, the *Fake Nonsites* and *Shipping Cartons*—Scanlan is concerned with the disappearance of art in ways that invoke the nostalgic memory of the golden age of conceptual art, and with its reappearance in ways that in turn invoke the more recent (hence inevitably less romantic) memory of eighties’ appropriation art²⁵ and that of nineties’ experiments with design and ‘furniture’; with the

reappearance—or, more apposite still, *rematerialization*—of the art object as just another object—or as the object *par excellence*: the artwork as *thing*.

As the dialectics of disappearance and reappearance (or, as its more historically relevant corollary would have it, ‘dematerialization’ and ‘rematerialization’) make glaringly clear, it is precisely this “now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t” dynamic that makes the *Nesting Bookcases* both Scanlan’s most resolutely ‘Duchampian’ gesture to date *and* his most hard-core outing into rigid, forbidding Concept Art terrain—an affiliation that is exhaustively scrutinized in Michael Newman’s inspired close reading of the work in question. Recognizing that “what gave the diverse practices that came together under the name of ‘Conceptual art’ their unity, and connected them with the first avant-garde, was the desire to disappear as art object, whether into idea, design or everyday life,” Newman asserts that the *Nesting Bookcases* exist in an almost ‘classic’ “tension between display and disappearance. They are at once the object on display and the means of display that recedes into the background: both figure and ground.” “The very attempt to make the object disappear” thus becomes a “condition for its appearance”. Concluding this reflection on the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, Newman ventures: “To seek as an artist to produce a generic object is to court a certain invisibility: to present, in the case of Scanlan’s *Nesting Bookcases*, something handmade, like a craft object or a traditional sculpture, as if it were factory-produced and bought from a showroom or catalogue; *to make something that will disappear into its own inevitability, simultaneously remaining and ceasing to be art*” (my italics). “An impossible demand: to be both visible and invisible at the same time (...) Such is the contradictory desire of the work of art in modernity.” This paradox is equally central to Theodor Adorno’s flux-like theory of the artwork.

I would like to conclude this essay with a consideration occasioned, in part, by the following quote from Michael Newman’s essay on the *Nesting Bookcases*: “One of the things that the ‘end of art’ that did not happen opens us to is the enigmatic status of the work. After Conceptual Art the work returns... as a question. What is a work? How does it occur? Where does a work begin and end?” Newman is right in noting that these questions have remained largely unanswered, and to his series of questions we could therefore perhaps add the following: *Does there exist a theory of the work of art at all?*

Theories abound as to what ‘art’ is and what being an artist entails, and there is much talk today of artistic practice—in a sense, ‘art’ seems to be the only place right now where a distinctly *Marxist* category such as ‘praxis’ is still allowed to survive and thrive even. But what about the artwork? The ‘piece’? That object which hovers, slightly uneasy, between the mutually exclusive realms of the Thing and the Commodity? Regardless of the remarkable revival

currently experienced by various notions of craft in contemporary art—the “return of the hand”, as Scanlan himself has called this phenomenon in a related context²⁶—and of a concurring resurgence of interest in the craftily executed art object (in many cases made, not so much by the artists generally held responsible for this revival, but by their legions of assistants instead), there seems to be lacking, in much of the ‘critical’ writing surrounding these revivals and resurfacings, a theory of the artwork as such—an unwillingness to go back to the artwork as an entity unto its own, i.e. as the ultimate guarantor of the *autonomy of art*.

There are probably many reasons why this has been the case—and further investigating them would probably warrant another essay—but one hypothesis I would like to put forward concerns our leisure society’s in-built resistance against the notion of *work* per se. Perhaps we are wary of the idea of ‘work’ entering the realm of the aesthetic, where we ourselves choose to retreat precisely to forget about the fact that ‘work’ dominates every day of our lives and every aspect of society; we resent the functionalist, utilitarian impulse that haunts all notions of ‘work’, its productivist impetus – so we marvel at that which *does not* work, and we are in awe of that which *is not* work. We dream of a laborless existence in which there are no vestiges left of the compulsion to ‘produce’, nothing that reminds us of that primeval divine damnation: “in toil you shall eat of the ground all the days of your life... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”. ‘Work’ is the name of the curse of our entry into this world, and of our taking part in that which is Real—and that is what art wants us alternately to remember and forget, reaffirm and deny again; this is where art’s awesome powers of both oblivion and remembrance lie. And it is with its “faculty of reminding” that Scanlan’s own ‘artwork’ is concerned: if one ‘thing’ can be said to define the acumen and genuinely critical brilliance of Joe Scanlan’s artistic practice, it is that it *puts art back to work*.

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973.

² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970.

³ “Madness and Civilization is the history of difference, The Order of Things the history of resemblances, sameness, and identity.” Michel Foucault in “The Order of Things”, interview with Raymond Bellour, republished in: James D. Faubian & Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, New York: the New Press, 1998.

⁴ The concept of “logocentrism” was first coined by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (published in 1967 as *De la grammatologie*) to circumscribe Western thought’s historical privileging of discursive reason as a point of access to truth; in this neologism, the Greek ‘logos’ references both logic and language, Reason and its linguistic articulation. In this foundational text of early postmodernism, Derrida meant to *denounce* the patriarchal rule of the signified (‘content’ or ‘meaning’) over the signifier (‘form’); in our current understanding of “logocentrism” as the cult of the brand name or the brand’s trademark logotype, however, it is the signifier that reigns supreme: the notorious Nike ‘swoosh’, the arches of McDonald’s capital ‘M’, the giant scallop of Royal Dutch Shell—and IKEA’s trademark yellow-and-blue logotype, famously hacked by Joe Scanlan among others. For an in-depth consideration of the related dialectic of (visual) presence and (visual) representation, see the chapters “Image and Violence” and “Forbidden Representation” in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

⁵ Knight, Isdell and Skinner are the founder & co-chair and current CEO’s respectively of Nike, The Coca-Cola Company and McDonald’s; none of them currently reside in the billionaire top hundred.

⁶ Cfr. Charity Scribner, *A Requiem for Communism*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005.

⁷ This quote is discussed at some length in the interview Phillip Van den Bossche conducted with Scanlan on the occasion of the installing of *Pay For Your Pleasure (reprise)* at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2003. In this interview, Scanlan remarks how “basically, my piece proposes that Michael Jordan and Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, are scarier monsters than John Wayne Gacy. But, unlike Gacy, Jordan and Kamprad are popular monsters. That’s an important difference.” Elsewhere in this piece, we also come across a quote by David Hammons: “My key is (...) abandon any art form that costs too much. Insist that it’s as cheap as possible is number one, and also that it’s aesthetically correct. After that, anything goes” – an eerie echo of the IKEA creed, one might venture. Finally, within the context of the present discussion of IKEA’s successful exploitation of the paradigms of the modernist avant-gardes, it is worth quoting Scanlan himself, in *Pay Dirt: A Manifesto* (Birmingham: IKON, 2003): “The avant-garde lives! Not because it’s more meaningful or radical than any other activity, but because it fills a legitimate market niche.”

⁸ A random search through the pages of Charles Harrison & Paul Wood’s mighty *Art in Theory* yields the following results: “It is essential to summon the masses to creative activity” (from the *Programme Declaration* by KOMFUT, 1919); “It is time that art entered into life in an organized fashion” (Alexander Rodchenko, 1920); “Progress means proving and explaining that everybody has the right to create” (El Lissitzky, 1922).

⁹ Cfr. “Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others”, in: Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (translated by Steven Rendall). Many insights gleaned from a timely reading of de Certeau’s epochal *Arts de faire* have inspired me in writing this essay; cfr. infra, in particular note 14.

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, op. cit.

¹¹ “Commerce” is the name of a journal, co-published by the artist, devoted to “economically motivated works of art”; in a stylistically supreme gesture of irony, the magazine’s design is modelled after that of *October*, the hallowed bastion of politically engaged art criticism.

¹² See, for instance, Scanlan’s *Lament for the Makers*, in which he celebrates “his influences, the distinguished architects and designers of the 20th century (anyone from Walter Gropius and “Charles and Ray” to Eero Saarinen) and the *Portable Utopias*, protest sign placards stating, more skeptically, that

“Victor Horta is Dead”, “Gehry is getting Scary” and “Koolhaas gives no Solace; these were first shown at Galerie Chez Valentin in Paris in 2005 as part of the exhibition *Things That Fall*.

¹³ The tremendous global impact IKEA has had on the artistic imagination is documented, among others, in the recurrent use of standard, instantly recognizable IKEA materials in various artistic practices, with the incomparable “Billy” bookcase frequently starring in a lead role. American artist Clay Ketter (formerly a carpenter himself), Bulgarian artist Daniel Bozhkov and Italian artist collective Gruppo A12 have all either made use of IKEA products in their respective works and projects, or alluded rather explicitly to the lure of Scandi-pop design. “Billy” also features prominently in a remarkable piece by emerging Belgian artist Stefaan Dheedene, who named his solo debut at SMAK in Ghent after the hugely popular shelving unit. Part performance, part video installation, part escapology trick, Dheedene’s project consisted of commissioning a traditional carpenter to build an exact replica of a Billy bookcase, slipping this replica in the cardboard package of an actual Billy unit bought at one of Belgium’s many IKEA outlets, and delivering this package, containing a ‘fake’, hand-made (i.e. ‘real’) bookcase, back to the IKEA store in question, whereupon the Dheedene-authored piece of furniture was allowed to irreversibly disappear into IKEA’s Great Chain of Being. Finally, the “Billy” bookcase also reappears in Joe Scanlan’s *Pay For Your Pleasure (reprise)* project, together with an enshrined AK-47 rifle among others. I will be coming back to the significance of the AK-47 (“Kalashnikov”) for Scanlan’s practice later on in this essay.

¹⁴ Here, we should revert once again to de Certeau’s eulogy of the quotidian and its potential for disrupting the divinely ordained Order of Things as delivered to us by way of the marketplace. In his preface to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau challengingly asserts the following opposition: “To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called “consumption”. The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (p. xiii). On page 31, he rephrases: “In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called “consumption” and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation, its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products but in an art of using those imposed on it” (p. 31). De Certeau goes to great lengths to stress the decidedly un-heroic nature of this “tireless but quiet activity”, as it is in its “quasi-invisibility” that he recognizes the faint glimmer of hope that another reality (or a differently administered reality) is possible: “The cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. (...) The tactics of consumption, the ingenuous ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (p. xvii).

¹⁵ I am referring here to Michael Newman’s exquisite and particularly thorough essay “After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan’s Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing”, published in Jon Bird & Michael Newman (ed.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999.

¹⁶ The AK-47 and its variants are the most frequently smuggled and illegally sold weapons in the world, its easily-copied frugal design making it particularly attractive to both rebel forces and dirt-poor ‘rogue’ regimes in the Third World – an especially harrowing mutant variation on the worldwide cult of the entrepreneurial handyman. The cultural impact of the original Kalashnikov-designed assault rifle is such that it even came to grace the flag of Mozambique.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of Scanlan’s “Traffic Control”, published in *Artforum*, Summer 2005, see my essay on the work of Canadian artist Steven Shearer in *A Prior* n° 12, Winter 2005.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, 1960; quoted in: Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

¹⁹ For an extensive discussion of the paradigm shift from oppositionality towards ‘complicity’ in contemporary art, see Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

²⁰ Theodor Adorno, op. cit.

²¹ Scanlan has exhibited these ‘artless’ images as a photographic suite or ‘artwork’ in its own right, and has called this body of work “*Les instances du récit*, or: Some Scenarios of A Free-market Economy Constantly Adapting to the Needs of An Audience”. On the photographic documentation of the *Nesting Bookcases*’ insertion (i.e. ‘disappearance’) into the various collectors’ homes, Michael Newman has remarked: “the photographs make visible an ‘art of practice’ that would otherwise be invisible”.

²² These various coffins are called *Custom* (Tasmanian blackwood), *Daybed* (MDF) and *D.I.Y.* (plywood); ironically, they can be found under the “Portable Architecture” banner at www.thingsthatfall.com. Within the context of our present discussion on art’s self-induced desire for its own disappearance or ‘death’, it is perhaps especially apposite to see in Joe Scanlan’s sleekly designed caskets the receptacles that will hold art’s embalmed corpse.

²³ One final comment on *DIY.*’s address: if the injunction to ‘do-it-yourself’ in some sense represents a parodic exacerbation of Joseph Beuys’ famously mystic dictum “jeder ist ein Künstler”, perhaps the coffin prepared with the help of various IKEA materials is then in fact destined to hold none other than the dead body of the Artist himself? Whatever is the case, Scanlan himself has already composed a funeral march of sorts by way of his *Lament For the Makers*, in which he pays homage to the mortals who have influenced him: the many dead designers and architects of the twentieth century.

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

²⁵ The tangential family resemblances between the work of Joe Scanlan and that of some of the pioneers of appropriation art is an issue too big to be touching upon here, but it is worth taking a closer look at the work of Guillaume Bijl and Haim Steinbach, both too often overlooked in the historiography of said ‘movement’, and their respective deployment of tactics of display and uses of the language and strategy of commerce as possible points of reference for further investigation.

²⁶ “The return of the hand — it’s like a severed body part in a cheap horror movie. The more we try to obliterate personal scale and individuality, the more it comes back to life in some other form”, in: *D.I.Y. Joe Scanlan Interviews Joe Scanlan*, on www.thingsthatfall.com. In this paragraph, Scanlan refers explicitly to his *Catalyst Acrylic Tears*, easy-to-wear fake teardrops you may want to don “any time you want to give the appearance of having feelings, or need to alter the chemistry of your surroundings”, coming in at \$20 a pack.