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M 06: MANIFESTOES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

These 6 manifestoes are text versions of the presentations made during two panel discussions at the Furniture Society's conference at the Herron School of Art in Indianapolis, Indiana, June 7-10, 2006.

MANIFESTERS:

- Jennifer Anderson
- Vivian Beer
- Matthew Hebert
- Dan Michalik
- Don Miller
- Susan Working

MODERATOR:

- Tom Loeser

Studio Furniture in the Expanded Field

Matthew Hebert

Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.¹

- Nicolas Bourriaud

Where does studio furniture belong? According to the above definition, studio furniture falls squarely into the world of art practice. A studio furniture object meets the criteria in spades. What type of object could better modulate the viewer's relationship with the world than studio furniture? Studio Furniture's status as art/design/craft has been argued, and I am signing on with Bourriaud. To create a piece of studio furniture is to create a work of art. Let's put that debate to bed, tuck it in, tell it a bed time story, turn off the lights, and start to dream.

Convincing the rest of the art world to accept studio furniture with open arms now becomes the problem. In order to enter into dialogue with the contemporary world of art, it is important to understand its concerns. While the studio furniture world has a history of introspection and critical discourse, it is a needle in the haystack of art theory; art theory had a bit of a head-start. In an attempt to create a bridge between the domain of studio furniture and that of art, I have decided to appropriate an older work of one of today's most influential art theorists and turn it towards a discussion of a possible definition of the field of studio furniture.

In her essay, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*², Rosalind Krauss poses that one of the limits to the further development of late modern sculpture was its reliance on negation in defining itself. After much historical framing, she sets up the definition of late modernist sculpture to be the simple negation of architecture

1 Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du réel, 1998. p.107

2 Krauss, Rosalind. *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, 1983. I am indebted to this essay for the inspiration and structure of my study of the state of studio furniture.

and landscape (Figure 1).

Artist's working within this negative definition of sculpture created works removed from the site, which was previously of the utmost significance. As a result of the modernist tendency towards self expression, sculpture was further removed from its roots in direct communication. Krauss poses that modern sculpture represents a dramatic break from the monument, its pre-modern antecedent. Stripped of the site specificity and communicative formal elements of the monument, the modern sculpture is understood as the creation of pure self-referential form in the non-space of the gallery. As an object lesson, Krauss chooses the work of Rodin. Commissioned to create monuments, Rodin instead created abstract forms that could hardly be recognized as their subjects. To further the signal the beginning of the end of pre-modern sculpture, the pieces were created in multiples and spread over the globe, losing more of their meaning through lack of site specificity.

Sensing a dramatic shift in art production in response to the state of late modernist sculpture, Krauss performs a simple trick and opens the doors to broaden the definition of an expanded field of sculpture. To do this she enters the above definition of sculpture as the bottom portion of a Klein Group. A Klein group is constructed by taking the opposite of each term and placing it on an axis above the original term, creating a structure with four axes. Each axis contains a term and its opposite. If you envision another definition being created by each axis you have an expanded field of sculpture and three related terms, one at each cardinal point (Figure 2).

Within this structure is the negative definition of sculpture, explained above, on what is called the neuter axis. The opposites of each of the terms comprising the above negative definition are placed on the complex axis. To complete the group, there are the two vertical axes that contain one half of the negative definition and its positive. Each of the sides of the structure contain definitions of work that could happen within the expanded field. Krauss then goes on to define each of the sides of the structure

and assign certain artists and examples of their work to these different areas. Krauss asserts that each of the chosen artists are creating work that falls outside of the negative modernist definition of sculpture that is found on the bottom of the field and are instead operating in the expanded field of sculpture that she has drawn up. She further explains that the work of one artist may occupy one or more axis with the field. To give the work found in this expanded field of sculpture a name, she chooses a term being used in many fields to describe work that has broken from the modernist trajectory: postmodernist.

My aim is to consider the field of studio furniture using Krauss' approach. From my experience defining our work through negation is prevalent within the studio furniture community. Depending on who you talk to you may get a different version. Common instances include: not-sculpture/not-design, not-sculpture/not-craft, not-design/not-art, not-art/not-craft, or maybe not-design/not-craft, etc. (although in conversation these terms are usually put into a structure such as: "*studio furniture is somewhere between x and y*", where x and y are any two of the above pairs.) The problem I have with all of these definitions is that they rely on verbs and not nouns. Almost anything can be seen as the product of some amount of art, craft, and design. The power of Krauss' definition lies in her ability to point to concrete things that are less ambiguous. Inspired by this approach, I have created a definition based on two types of concrete objects (Figure 3).

The first thing I must do is unpack these terms, then I can plug them into the Klein group, to generate an expanded field, as Krauss did when I was still in diapers...

First, I must deal with the terms that are being negated in order to define studio furniture. After considering many other options, I chose to use *house* and *houseware* as the two terms that in negation can create a definition of studio furniture. *House* speaks of a container or space, while *houseware* a distinct object. *House* points to architecture, space, and time; while *houseware* indicates industrial design, tools, and ergonomics. The two terms also

draw a distinction in how humans relate to the objects they refer to. *House* refers to the structure that shelters its inhabitants and so doing provides them comfort. *Houseware* suggests an object to be used by the inhabitant to complete a task.

I now turn my attention to the term, studio furniture. This is a tricky one and many people might not agree with my definition. As I have already asserted, I believe that studio furniture refers to the work of furniture makers operating in an art mode of production. To put studio furniture into a system between the negatives of these two terms, is to suggest that it resides in a realm between architecture, spaces, and shelters, on one side, and discrete functional objects on the other. Notice also that a studio is quite different from a shop, not to mention a factory. The word studio conjures up images of the painter paining over his canvas or the sculptor trying to capture his muse in stone. Studio furniture makers create work to be sold through galleries or commissions, this model of distribution extends this comparison with other studio artists further. I suggest that studio furniture, due to the nature of its creation and production is something different from furniture design and historic furniture reproduction work.

Now that I have the definition of studio furniture constructed, I can employ the techniques used by Krauss and create an expanded field of studio furniture. First, I will add the positive terms on the axis above the negative terms then I will finish off the field. To do this I must swap the super-cool phrases that Krauss coined in her expanded field of sculpture with some of my own that apply to the expanded field of studio furniture (Figure 4).

I will start at the top, on the complex axis, with the *house/houseware* continuum. I have dubbed work that suspends itself between *house* and *houseware*, *holistic environments*. Artists working in this portion of the field include Andrea Zittel and Allan Wexler. Their sculptural works deal with the intersection of domestic space and personal objects. In *Vinyl Milford House* (1994), for example, Wexler creates a domestic space with integrated furniture objects (Figures 5 and 6). The space itself is treated as a piece of convertible furniture. It is a container

for people as well as a bed, table, and chairs. When one use is function is required, the space reconfigures to accommodate. The space can only accommodate half of the furniture at one time. Zittel's work often inhabits similar territory. Her *A-Z Living Units* (2003), are living spaces to be placed within larger living spaces (Figure 7). Based on her interests in transient living patterns, the units act as a very sophisticated piece of furniture. They provide for many different activities that take place inside and outside of the typical apartment space. Wexler and Zittel's work blurs the boundaries between architecture and furniture. The structure of their shelters is also the storage system for the objects contained within. The approach is a contemporary sculptural take on the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, riffing on the work of Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau designers. To create an object that acts as both house and houseware is to create an *holistic environment*; a work that is a space/object that meets the needs of its occupant(s) through modulation.

On the left side of the field, in the *house/not-house* continuum, which I have dubbed *problematized structures*, I have placed work that uses the language and forms of architecture to create unstable structures. Into this category I have placed the work of artists, such as Los Carpinteros, Gord Peteran, and Rachel Whiteread. Los Carpinteros have produced a series of cabinets that are shaped like iconic modernist buildings found in Havana. This juxtaposition of cabinets with buildings is a powerful and mysterious one. Does it speak of the state of architecture or objects in Cuban culture? The piece, *FOCSA* (2002), is a cabinet based on the massive modernist apartment building, of the same name, in Havana (Figure 8). It can be read as a comment on the state of pre-Castro Cuba, the failed idealism of modernism, and the dehumanizing quality of bureaucracy. In Gord Peteran's *Ark* (2000), we find the familiar form of the vitrine turned on its head. This display cabinet has been melded with a phone booth to create a seating piece that puts the user on display (Figure 9). *Ark* is scaled similarly to pieces meant for the display of small objects, but put to use displaying people. It is a piece that talk of the theatrical quality of furniture, the way it conditions our perception of people and objects. Whiteread's work takes

the language of architecture and literally turns it inside out. In her most famous, and possibly most successful piece, *House* (1993), Whiteread cast a complete shell of the interior spaces of a Victorian terrace house in East London (Figure 10). The shell retained scraps of the material of the house while giving one the impression of the space that was held within. These concretized spaces act as tombs or monuments to the lives that were acted out inside of them. All of these pieces are concerned with the problematizing of given structures. They give us fresh insight into how we relate to the world in relation to architecture and furniture.

On the right side of the field, is the *houseware/not-houseware* continuum. This axis serves as the home of work that is simultaneously a functional object and not a functional object. This is the place where we find *meaningful objects* that do not adhere to Louis Sullivan's puritanical adage *form follows function*³. On this axis, one can find the work of Studio Boym, Marcel Wanders, and Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. Studio Boym creates clever works of design, drawing heavily on the Duchampian tradition of employing the found and often banal object to great effect. In their series of china pieces, *Salvation* (2001), Studio Boym has found a way to breath new life into castoff china found in thrift stores across the nation (Figure 11). The simple act of stacking and adhering these orphaned plates and teacups creates new forms and a new uses, as well as pieces with a strong message. It is hard to ignore the facts of the pieces construction, a result of cleverly working with the aftermath of our consumer society. Marcel Wanders has been dealing with similar problems for quite some time. He creates work that deals with the question of producing individualized pieces that are still reproducible. His hope is that if the pieces are seen as individuals the bond the owner forms with them will be strong. In *Sponge Vase* (1997), Wanders creates a completely unique form every time by using the natural sponge as the mold for the vase (Figure 12). Finally, I wish to discuss the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. Stemming from their interest in the modern landscape of radio

³ Sullivan, Louis H. *The tall office building artistically considered*. Lippincott's Magazine, March 1896.

waves that we find ourselves occupants of, the two designers have created a body of work that explores this terrain and our relation to it. In the *Electro-draught Excluder* (2001), Dunne & Raby have created a placebo houseware (Figure 13). The piece is a frame containing a piece of radio wave blocking foam. Since the foam is not grounded it provides no shelter from the waves careening all about. It is however a powerful placebo and when placed between the user and the television can give the user a very strong, although false, sense of security. The piece becomes a symbolic defense against the hazards of the modern domestic space. All of these *meaningful objects* rely on mentally activating the user in hope of forming stronger bonds than would a purely aesthetic designed object.

What have we learned from all this? I believe that this sort of exercise could have taken many different shapes. And that is the point. If we, the studio furniture community, broadened the definition of ourselves, through the adoption of a more inclusive definition, we could open up a lot of new avenues with our work. We could fulfill the promise of studio furniture, which is to be a field of artistic creation connected to the greater art world. The artists creating work in this expanded field of studio furniture, are rigorously examining what it means to create functional and aesthetic objects in our present day and how these objects set up relationships between people and space. I challenge each and everyone one of us to spend some time, plug in your negative definition (you know you have one) and see what pops up in your expanded field of studio furniture.

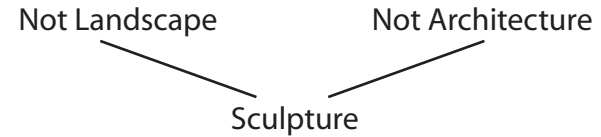


Figure 1: Negative definition of sculpture.

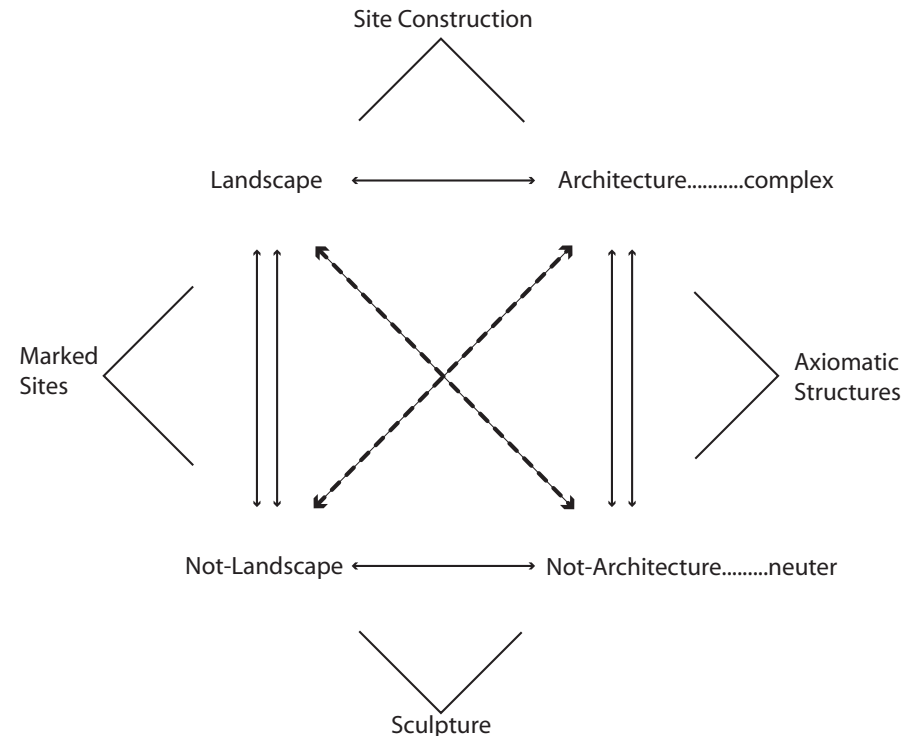


Figure 2: Krauss' expanded field of sculpture.



Figure 7: A-Z Living Units, Andrea Zittel.

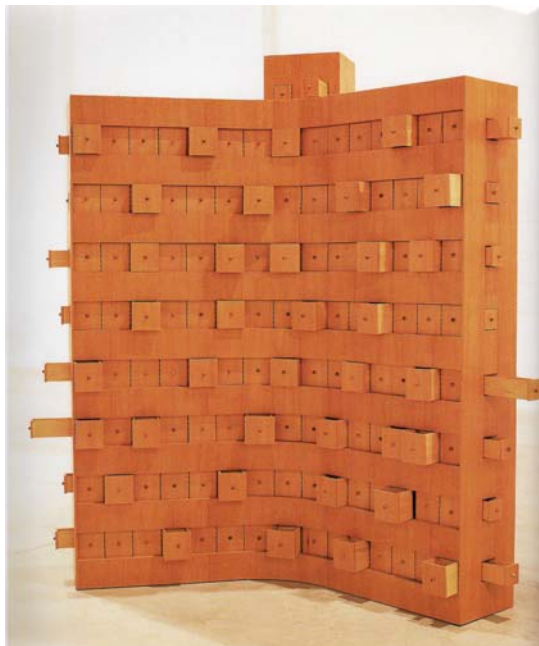


Figure 8: FOSCA, Los Carpinteros.



Figure 9: Ark, Gord Peteran.



Figure 10: House, Rachel Whiteread.



Figure 11: Salvation, Studio Boym.

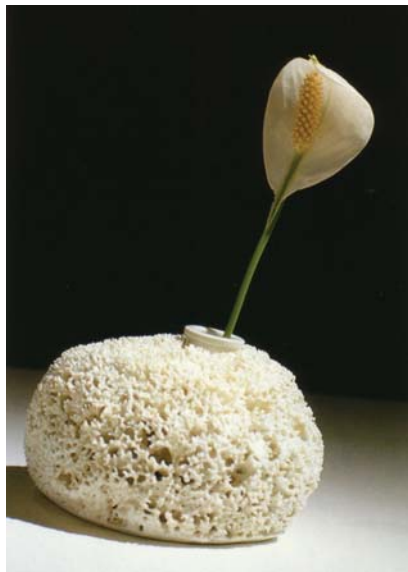


Figure 12: Sponge Vase, Marcel Wanders.

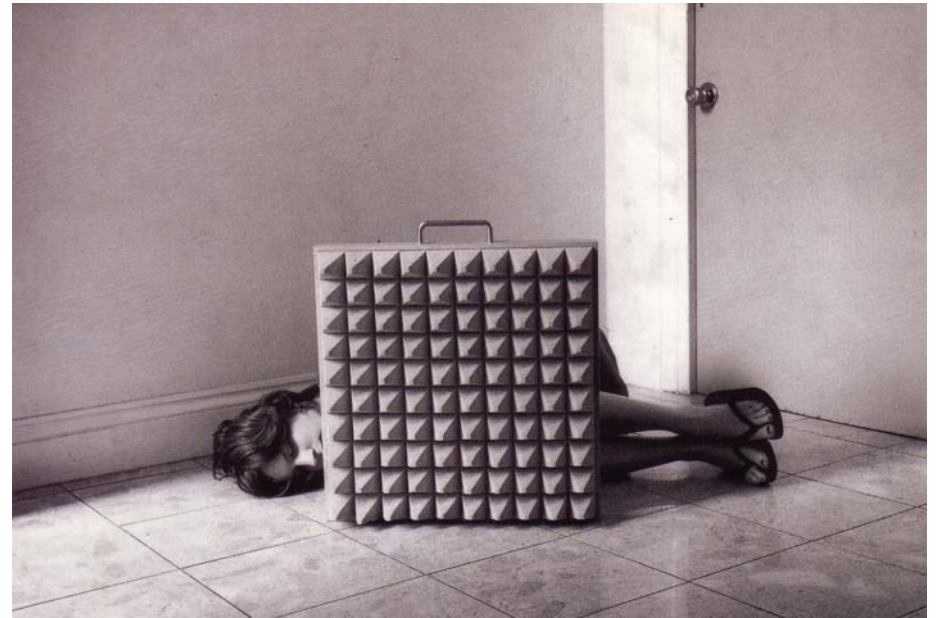


Figure 13: Electro-draught excluder, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby.