Meta Culture
Branding, Semiology and the language of display

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Abstract

Through the use of expanded sculpture, painting and installation this research project examines some of the unrecognised ideologies and values that are perpetuated into visual culture through the fragmentation and distribution of brands and the commodified image. The artworks made in this project explore the ways in which the display of commodities informs socio-political value systems, class structures and notions of status within consumer culture. I think these values are often mediated through cultural signs, semiotic structures and on a large scale, influence the production and presentation of contemporary art today.

The research examines our psychological and unconscious relationship to brands. I aim to examine how this may influence the cultural notion of excess and how this is perpetuated through current modes of representation used within a commercial context. In particular, some of these psychological and social values that will be explored surround notions of desire, security, pleasure, the ego and notions of self.

Within the development of large-scale installations and environments, I aim to create a correspondence or dialogue between certain histories within abstract painting and corporate culture. These assemblages are used to create satirical and paradoxical readings of the language of display and to explore the relationship between art and merchandise.

The research will seek to identify the ways in which brands function as structures of written language and in doing so, influences the role of images within a capitalist economy. I believe they abstract notions of value and affluence based on their role as spectacle. This is an area of discussion explored through methods such as juxtaposition, re-contextualisation, collage and an analogous arrangement of commodities and found materials.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The aim of this research project is to find ways in which an expanded art practice may be used to examine some of the social, political and psychological values that stem from branding and its role within consumer culture. Through the use of sculpture, installation and painting I aim to explore the ways in which brands function as cultural signs and in doing so, influence structures of value.

The research will examine the way brands inform the relationship between contemporary art and the shopping mall: how the design, display and layout of commodities has within it a language which corresponds with the presentation of art. The research questions which provide the theoretical framework for this investigation are the following:

1. How may an expanded art practice be used to understand the ways in which brands function as cultural signs and shape the modes of representation that operate within consumer culture?

2. In what ways can creative methods such as juxtaposition, caricature, placement and collage be used to reflect some of the social and economic values that are formed through commodities and the language of display?

The artworks made within this research project will be developed through critical methodologies such as juxtaposition, collage, re-contextualisation and anthropomorphism. These methods will be employed in order to examine the underlying subtext and corporate ideologies that give certain commodities the power to act as cultural signs. In doing so, I aim to explore the ways in which this informs certain hierarchies amongst class structures and contributes to notions of status and economic divides between affluence and poverty.

Through the making of these artworks, I aim to generate readings of the ways in which brands have been woven into a fabric of written language. What I hope to identify is that the signifying capacity of certain brands have dissolved into ‘atmospheric values’ in which language acts as spectacle and as a series of connotations intended more so to be ‘experienced’ rather than read. I believe that understanding these occurrences through which we have transitioned into a consumer culture is one that can be understood through an examination of semiotic structures; signs which have been, not veiled, but rather obscured and distorted through a commercial repurposing of language.

Within this PhD, an expanded art practice will be employed to understand the corporate language of design and formalism and how these constructs influence modes of class division.
that shape the domestic and social facets of our everyday life. Through the development of large-scale sculptures and installations I think that an expanded art practice may provide a new lens through which these capitalist structures of organisation and management which may be understood in new ways.

It often appears that certain mass-produced commodities have within them an inherent political or psychological subtext or ideology. The aim here is to find ways to unpack these underlying values through the re-coordination of readymade objects into sculptural forms. In
doing so, I hope to be able to animate and expand upon these concealed ideologies that appear embedded in the visual design of merchandise.

In thinking of these object-based assemblages as modes of writing, as corresponding cultural signs, I believe their capacity to speak of their concealed ideology and motivations to correspond to a globalised network of excess and affluence can be understood in a new light. In thinking of what underlying ideologies operate within the various hierarchies of display, I would argue these are visual connotations which allude to a wide range of social beliefs and values. Some of which relate to notions of choice, freedom, security, control, sexual desire and status among other things.

Fetishistic commodities have developed their own modes of political and psychological speech, which I would argue, have contributed to a corporate and commercial structuring of rhetoric. This has formed a distortion of the political language used to critique and understand the divisions between labour and value, luxury and technology and instead, it has built upon a fabricated spectacle of affluence. I believe that these values and ideologies stem primarily from the increased mobilisation of images within a media saturated culture, in which it appears that brands act more as a social apparatus used to organise the movement and activity of people through their platforms of communication and spectatorship.

It seems that in many ways contemporary art is not exempt to this conditioning. The presentation of art today is conflated into a series of jpegs and online images. In which case the email invitation and post on Instagram seems to substitute or stand in for the event itself.

Art Galleries today bare a strong resemblance to the shopping mall. They have become spaces to consume just as much as the franchise department store, accompanied with gift and souvenir shops and cafes. The enormous amounts of promotion, advertising and sponsorship leading up to the opening of an exhibition is akin to a blockbuster movie and its opening debut at the local cinema, with merchandise available to accompany the viewing experience. By re-contextualising and reconfiguring the display structures within my own artwork, I would like to create a satirical commentary on the ways in which ‘art-as-merchandise’ has become a prominent characteristic within contemporary art.

I think these large-scale museums, biennales and ‘Gagosian-style’ galleries exist just as much within the flows, counter-flows and circuits of economic movement and within a systemic network of capital organisation. Following this obscuration of boundaries within Contemporary Art, there seems to be a remarkable paradox of ‘counter-culture’. If the intention of certain artworks is to subvert or push against establishment class structures, how

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1 The word ‘connotation’ is used throughout this dissertation in reference to Jean Baudrillard’s discourse on semiotics and sign systems as outlined in his text The System of Objects. Connotation in this context refers to the way an object signifies cultural ideals, values or ‘atmosphere’. What Baudrillard identifies is the capacity for a commodity to signify abstract values outside of itself in a similar way to how certain words signify meaning beyond its written form.
does it achieve this from within ‘high-status’ institutions and galleries? A central concern here is how the role of the art object and particular modes of artistic production oscillate between being an active form of critique of the currency of commodities and, at the same time, becomes a commodity in itself.

Something that is noticeable in both the art museum and shopping mall is that commodified images and brands rely upon categorisation to become part of a flow of productivity- to become part of a network of consumption. From the gallery or museum logos on the packaging of the café sandwiches, the merchandise displays with Jeff Koon’s coffee coasters and Henry Matisse carry bags or Chagall kitchen aprons, each commodity functions as an integral part of a web of connected cultural signs; an organisation and compartmentalisation of cultural movements wherein the individual is a contributing part of this organising system.

Within this area of investigation, the developing body of work will focus upon the cultural phenomenon of excess and how this is informed by the role of the brand as an image. What is excess and how is it perpetuated as an ideology, as a social value and how is it realised through the movement and distribution of images?

The theoretical and conceptual framework for this PhD will be formed through a discourse based on the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Maurizio Lazzarato, Guy Debord, Isabelle Graw and W.J.T. Mitchell. These figures provide the existing body of knowledge from which my art practice will develop. These discussions, more specifically, focus on themes surrounding semiology, mythology, simulacra and the glitch, which I will attempt to unpack and further expand upon through the development of an expanded art practice.

Brands have become increasingly obscure in their transition from being read-able signs into an image designed for the purpose of being ‘experienced’. They are engineered to direct the consumer towards a subjective state: we do not read brands, we ‘feel’ them. I often think of branding as a ‘chameleon’ in the sense that it mimics and resembles written sign structures in appearance. However, brands are mutations of semiotic structures and abbreviations of language which obscure the meaning that words embody. They replace original sign structures with a narrowed down version of itself, a cartoon or caricature in some respects. I would argue that this is an operation of myth in consumer language, which replicates and reproduces itself as a kind of avatar or ghost. One which speaks in essences and operates as a spectacle more so than anything else.
On the subject of ‘consumer culture’, I am not speaking of ‘consumerism’ in the literal sense that we consume food by way of ingestion, or objects or clothes that are worn. I propose that we do not ‘consume’ their materiality as individual objects - rather we consume their inherent sign system. We consume the internal network of significations that an individual commodity speaks to. In this sense, the product embodies the idea that it is, in itself, inter-connected to a constellation of other cultural meanings, it is tied into a moving network of connotations that connect the consumer to ideas of productivity, security and life-style. Something becomes an object of ‘consumption’ once it belongs to this sign system of connectedness and inter-relational meaning. By consuming the individual object, we thereby consume its inherent network of global connotation. We absorb this myth and become an active contributor to its acceleration and its excretion. Jean Baudrillard addresses this point, identifying consumption beyond the materiality and use of objects;

“Consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a phenomenology of ‘affluence’. It is not defined by nourishment we take in, nor by the clothes we clothe ourselves with. Nor by the car we use. Nor by the oral and visual matter of the images and messages we receive. It is defined by, rather, by the organisation of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption is the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse. If it has any meaning at all, consumption means an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs.”

What the above passage brings to mind is a correspondence between one commodity to its commercial order, its system. It is this correspondence, this movement from one signification to another that determines the commercial potential of an object; the garage corresponds to the car, the fridge to the kitchen, shampoo to the conditioner; each object embedded into a systemic dialogue of economic flow and inseparable-ness to its neighbouring product.

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3 Within this research project, the term correspondence is used to describe an individual or isolated objects ability to speak to more universal ideas and broader meanings outside of itself. I have used the term ‘correspondence’ here in reference to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of abstract values or ‘atmospheric values’. In this sense, the term is used to describe products or commodities which operate within a network of significations or describes an individual product’s capacity to signify beyond its material and tangible presence.

The capacity for an object to correspond to its own system that brought it into momentum is what measures its consumer ‘value’. I think this is true of both the commodity and the brand that represents it, the modes of representation that surround it. The inter-changeable, the inter-dependent conversation from one brand, one corporate body to another. This is a visual correspondence that I believe can be conveyed through the coupling and binding together of hand-made and ready-made forms into sculptural compositions, particularly through the contrasting of not only images and objects, but their imbued political and psychological undercurrents.

In works such as Ikebana Tree (Image 1.1), for example, I have attempted to create a satirical or absurdist reading of consumer culture through the weaving together of cultural objects into a vertical and totemic structure. This was intended to convey the sense of a removal of the divides and boundaries which are used to categorise products within the display. It is a conflation between product values.

The modes of signification that operate in consumer culture have been built upon these structures of representation that have already merged together; as a result, we have a simplified form of language, a cartoon like representation of ideology, a caricature or comic depiction of value. This has for a long time brought about a regression in cultural signification, one that has distorted and fragmented the role of the image and how we relate to it. I think it is interesting to consider how and in what circumstances we now ‘see’ writing more so than read it. Somewhere within the modes of deciphering and interpretation, there
seems to be, what W.J.T. Mitchell refers to as a *pictorial turn*, a change in the way images and words are used differently on a global scale and through a world view.

A basic example here is the commonly recognisable deodorant brand ‘Lynx’ (Image 1.2). In this instance, the word does not evoke the image it was designated to. There is a schism between the word and its meaning. In noticing these ‘schisms’ between words and what they signify, I started to explore this idea by using computer editors such as Photoshop to merge together commonly known artworks with popular advertisements. *The Glitch* (Image 1.3) was an early attempt at playing upon image and text relationships as they are used within particular areas of advertising. In doing so, I started to think about what political and social readings might be brought about by manipulating written signs to mean something other than what they were designated for and how I could create various readings of this within my practice.

*Lynx*, in a commercial context, signifies a whole range of vague notions surrounding hyper-masculinity, excess, sex, power, success and many other social ideals. This phenomenon is what Roland Barthes refers to as a ‘de-politicising’ of language. By words being emptied of their intended meaning, they no longer have any analytical power. The fullness and richness

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4 “Thus, the invention of artificial perspectives, the arrival of easel painting and the invention of photography were all greeted as “pictorial turns” and were seen as either wonderful or threatening […] Pictorial Turns usually invoke some version of the distinction between words and images […] the most anxiety-provoking version of the pictorial turn – is often grounded in the fear that masses of people are being led astray by a false image […]” WJT Mitchell, Image Science, “The Pictorial Turn” (University of Chicago Press, 2015) 14.

of significations within a word, in the context of advertising, is substituted for spectacle or ambient values pertaining to entertainment.

Image 1.4 A brass replica of one of the earliest discovered clay Cuneiform tablets found in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq): approximately 2600 BC, 5000 years old. Replica provided by the Louvre, Paris France. One of the earliest examples of written language, image by Michael Georgetti. 2017

By re-coordinating found objects and images into sculptural forms, I am attempting to demonstrate how an expanded art practice may be able to trace the correlative links between semiotics and brands. I would like to propose that a brand in essence, is not a sign. It is a mimetic appearance of a sign, the imitation of such which requires group participation in its spectacle in order for it to become ‘real’.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this area of discourse, I would like to draw upon certain histories of psycho-analysis which have, over the years, influenced the corporate efforts to implement more tactical and persuasive marketing strategies into the branded image which is used in visual culture today. In particular, a pivotal figure in this investigation is Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud who established a psycho-analytical framework for using effective marketing strategies to target the subconscious and unconscious desires of consumers in America. These studies were implemented into the U.S consumer market as forms of media propaganda used in order to help companies create persuasive advertising strategies as early as the 1920s.

According to documentary film maker and director Adam Curtis, this was done in a corporate attempt to generate control over the mass-production of commodities which has brought about the current consumer culture that operates today. Curtis identifies this in his documentary Century of The Self, in which he claims that “Edward Bernays showed
American corporations for the first time how he could make people want things they didn’t need by linking mass-produced goods to their unconscious desires.”

This is an historical outline that points towards some of the influences of the commodity and its modes of representation - how images are used today in order to generate structures of division and status within these schematics.

Within the following chapters I will attempt to identify how these discussions inform the development of my artwork. To begin with, I would like to first discuss the methods I use within the production of my work and how these approaches have allowed me to generate or expose certain narratives and findings within the outcomes of my practice. The chapters proceeding this will aim to identify the choice of materials I use and what rationale or conceptual framework informs this selection process.

Within the Methodology and following chapter, The Politics of Materials, I will attempt to elaborate on the cultural and economic values assigned to objects and how this determines their chosen role within the production of the artworks I make. From here I will attempt to give specific examples of artworks which I think have generated and unpacked certain readings through the application of these methods.

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* Adam Curtis, “Happiness Machines”, *Century of the Self* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmg0R1M04](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmg0R1M04) 2002. Date of publication: 20/06/2016 Date of access: 1/08/2016
Chapter 2

Methodology

Outline of chapter

The following chapter explores how certain artworks within this research project are made in a studio context and why certain materials and images have been chosen to customise into artworks. It explores some of the reasoning behind the decision-making process and the rationale behind the placement and coordination of found objects and materials. The subject being explored within this chapter is an attempt to realise a conceptual framework that has allowed my creative practice to evolve. There is a series of referenced examples and demonstrations accompanied by images which are used to describe the role of branding and specific materials which I think signify various socio-political values. This chapter outlines how I might be able to identify these values and unpack them through studio investigations. Furthermore, I will identify how these methods are developed in response to my research questions:

1. How may an expanded art practice be used to understand the ways in which brands function as cultural signs and shape the modes of representation that operate within consumer culture?

2. In what ways can creative methods such as juxtaposition, caricature, placement and collage be used to reflect some of the social and economic values that are formed through commodities and the language of display?

Through the use of installation, sculpture and painting the artworks I make examine ideas surrounding the language of display and the underlying social and psychological values and modes of signification that are embodied in corporate/formalist architecture, mass-produced commodities and branding. This involves the reconfiguring and merging together of various readymades. These materials can act analogously and signify various political, grotesque or caricature-like readings of consumer culture and the mythological operations that occur in and around commodities.

7 The term ‘readymade object’, is used in the context of this research project to describe un-altered or partially altered objects that have not originally been made by the artist but are used for the intended purpose of being an artwork. The term derived from André Breton’s description of Marcel Duchamp’s sculptural objects in Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme. In reference to this historical discourse I have used the term to generally describe a kind of intervention in which the artist re-purposes objects away from their intended function or role in everyday life to become art. Hector Obalk, “The traditional definition of a readymade” The Unfindable Readymade (Tout-fait Articles 2000)
https://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html publish date: 05/2000 access date: 05/10/2019
This includes the use of clay, digital print, readymade objects, painting and assemblage. These artworks attempt to play upon, and reconfigure the commodity as a cultural sign in consumer society in order to re-frame the ways in which they conflate the modes of representation in an increasingly internet-based economy.

Within the making of my artwork, this involves creating a parody or satirical play upon the design-like formalism of corporate display and luxury items, attempting to create readings of the excessive presence of brands and logos. It also involves giving emphasis to the theatrical and stage-like qualities of painting as I have attempted to demonstrate in the work titled Hierophant - Major Arcana (Image 5.1).

In this example, the canvas has been separated from the stretcher to give a figurative quality to the vertical picture plane; that the canvas and the stretcher have been deconstructed and re-assembled to denote a human quality. The structure has been elevated onto a platform in order to convey a theatrical or performative reading of the painting as an upright structure.

Some of these methods, used within the making of these structures, encompass ideas surrounding caricature, collage, intervention and re-contextualisation. The materials include mass-produced logos, brands and consumer items that we see frequently in movies, billboard advertisements or franchise fast-food advertisements. These materials are chosen because they are cheap and are propelled into culture through establishment wealth. They are brought into culture through a relationship between wealth and poverty.

I am interested in the idea that brands deliberately confuse and obscure exactly the nature of economic relationships between corporate wealth and poverty. Brands determine the ‘quality’ of products based on their exposure or role within a market of supply and demand, accumulation and exchange rather than the ‘use-value of objects and their capacity to provide for human needs.

I will attempt to create a spatial dialogue between 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional spaces in an effort to convey these readings within the display structures I make. I think this could be achieved by disrupting the logic of readymade objects in relation to how we normally expect to see them and how they are meant to operate in every-day life. By reconfiguring the everyday function of these objects, I notice that their allegorical meaning and hidden ideologies often become clearer.

This is a form of stripping these readymade objects of their relative context – removing or adding the brand label or logo from a piece of designer clothing or taking certain luxury products out of their retail/commercial context, re-contextualising these objects into the form of an artwork. This is intended to separate these readymade objects from certain cultural expectations placed upon them in order for them to be seen anew. I often use juxtaposition and re-contextualisation to contrast images belonging to different contexts or containing
different narratives. I often think of these methods as being political in the sense that they can be used to reflect upon the power and authority of certain brands, images and commodities. I think these methods can be used to change the meaning of commodities through placement and arrangement, which creates hierarchical divisions and value systems amongst objects.

The installations I make often contain designer products, domestic furniture, fashion items, clothing and stickers of various brands and logos. By reconfiguring these materials into anthropomorphic forms and machine-like structures, I have attempted to reveal some of the psychological nuances that are embedded in these materials and objects. It often appears that certain typographies and fonts have within them a number of psychological and political ideologies that sit beneath the visual rhetoric of their role as advertisements.

In the work, *E.T.I.H.A.D* (Image 1.5) I have attempted to animate these narratives through the anthropomorphising of the chosen materials. A sports jacket has been stuffed and suspended upon a steel scaffold. Within this sculpture, I have woven the branded figure into the support structure so that the display becomes a contextualising parameter and at the same time. I wanted it to act as a prosthetic extension of the figure, perhaps appearing as limbs or stilts that balance and support the upper body.
An exhibition I held at La Trobe Art Institute in Bendigo was comprised of a large-scale installation in which I attached vinyl stickers of the ETIHAD brand logo to a frame-like structure which was placed in the centre of the gallery space. This was done in order to explore the idea of the display as an extension of writing. I often think of the branded display as a form of language, an apparatus that ‘speaks’ on behalf of the product it upholds.

In this work titled Quasi-Bodies I have explored this idea through forming a relationship between painting and sculpture in the form of a large-scale floor and wall work which are positioned in close proximity to each other. The title of this work ‘Quasi-Bodies’ is informed by Isabelle Graw’s essay Reflexivity and Agency: Painting Beyond Itself:

In this text, Graw describes the idea of a painting being an extension of the body or a substitute for the body in its absence. She describes the ways in which gestures and mark-making processes inscribe or trace the signification of the physical presence of the artist into the painting. In which case the painting then becomes the substitute of the artist’s presence through its inscribed marks, as a trace or link to its author. In this sense the painting, as an

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8 “I propose to relate the ghostlike presence of the absent author in painting to the way indexical signs actually operate […] Painting is, in other words, a highly differentiated language that consists of a number of techniques, methods and artifices, which allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author’s quasi-persence as an effect.” Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Liveliness” Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in a Post-Medium Condition, (Frankfurt, Sternberg Press. 2017). 93
object, is described as a certain kind of quasi-body - a signification of the artist’s physical presence.

In this work, the application of custom-made stickers onto the frame is intended to create a deliberate reading of ‘art-as-merchandise’. I wanted to create the sense that these sculptural forms are sponsored by multinational companies. The mat and placement of the elevated platform in this configuration was used to create a satirical reading of the objects as décor or to give the feeling that they were coordinated as part of an interior design layout.

In works such as *French Partition* (Image 1.6), I have applied a similar use of materials. I attached the Georgio Armani logo to the display which encases a large painting. This appeared to empty the brand of its corporate and cultural opulence by being situated in a new context encasing a large abstract painting. The ‘hand-made’ nature of the support, the scratches, marks and worn areas of the painting and overall structure seemed to remove any commodity value or ‘atmospheric value’ belonging to this brand.

In doing this, I had intended to empty out any atmospheric value or remove any ‘ambience’ that it has assigned to the consumer logo and instead, in the context of this artwork, amplify its corporate imperative. In this sense, the work aims to function as critique: to criticise or question the political and corporate intentions of the brand and its economic motive to function on a psychological level of ambient and atmospheric stimuli.

Some of these qualities are psychological and pertain to ideas surrounding pleasure and sexual desire. Many of these objects carry a knowledge of branding that reveal where they
came from and why. Through the deconstruction of objects, my assemblages seek to expose some of the coded and allegorical languages that operate beneath the veneer of rhetoric that makes up most of the glossy surfaces, bright fluorescent colours and various fonts and graphic designs that are printed and embedded in these materials.

The accumulation of photocopies, stickers and printed images in the most recent installations are sourced from designer logos which are built into, for example, the front entrance of a retail store or a perfume display stand. These photocopies and stickers are cut up and glued directly on to sculptures, readymade objects or steel shelves.

Within these assemblages placed on the floor, I have combined a vast range of heterogeneous images brought together from fashion advertisements, shampoo packaging, airline brand icons and hip-hop logos. In doing so, I am attempting to depict the way in which the internet and its modes of representation democratise information: the hierarchies between significant and insignificant information, between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures are conflated into a single screen, allowing multiple forms of content to be experienced simultaneously. Information which is disparate and separated is now singular and bound by the same digital format.

Within the context of these works, I have started to consider how I could communicate this idea of a schism or divide between images and pictures, between material and immaterial kinds of imagery. This is to say that these pictorial and spatial differences could be described in a similar way to the contrast between the textured surface of a painted canvas and that of a
digital print on vinyl or aluminium. The ‘materiality’ of surface differences here can be used to describe the dialogue or contrast between pictures and images. An example of this can be seen in works such as Ladder (Image 4.0), a large-scale collage in which I have layered the printed image of a shampoo bottle across the centre of the picture plane. The image is staggered in repetition in order to create a sensation of technical or digital ‘glitch’. This is achieved using analogue methods of collage and printed hardcopies in order to depict the experience of failure or collapse within the screen interface of a computer or on a mobile device. By using a layering of multiple printed and photocopied images placed on top of each other I have attempted to convey the sense of a slippage between the analogue and digital modes of representation.

I started to make a couple of larger scale paintings in a similar collagic approach in order to examine this idea of a material schism between images and pictures. I think this is more a way of exploring material/ immaterial differences which W.J.T. Mitchell identifies as a spatial and linguistic schism in the construction of two-dimensionality:

“What is the difference between a picture and an image? I like to start with the vernacular, listening to the English language, in a distinction that is untranslatable into German: You can hang a picture but you can’t hang an image. The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction— in memory, in narrative, in copies and traces in other media.”

In correspondence with W.J.T Mitchell’s comments, I started to reflect upon how I could apply contrasting textured surfaces and found objects to the canvas as a means to examine and further expand on this idea of an image/picture dialogue within the construction of these works.

I continued to explore this idea by cutting into large surface areas of paintings, which can be seen in works such as Speech and Fog, (Image 3.2). In this work, I felt that by emphasising the 3-dimensionality of painting, by propping it upright as a sculpture or provisional scaffold-like structure, I would be able to create a reading of this notion of an image/picture dialogue. I felt that the materiality of these painterly constructions, the gestures and marks that were de-composed and re-arranged within them, were able to connect this inquiry to ideas about writing and historical sign structures.

Within other installations I have made, I have positioned a variety of images in the form of stickers, posters and branded commodities on the floor, which are used based on their popularity and how proliferated they are in advertising, on television or through social media. I notice their appearance on billboards, in shopping malls, on key chains or stickers on car windows. Mostly what is of interest is how familiar these images and icons have become to the point where they form part of our subconscious. These images are exposed to the point

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where they have faded into the periphery of our visual field and become naturalised within culture.

How frequently an image appears throughout the metropolitan area and how the image appears on food packaging and energy drink sponsorship posters is a measure of the wealth and power that propels that image into our visual culture and into our domestic environment. There is a hidden violence in the way images are relentlessly thrown into our urban landscape, on rotating billboards and on LED screens at the airport luggage carousel. The commodified and non-artistic image is integrated into our environment in a way that contributes to our passive receiving of images.

In this way, I often think the image acts solely for the purpose of conjuring up a ‘feeling’ of entertainment. The word, ‘entertainment’, seems increasingly difficult to define today, as it has become an idiom that expands across all areas of culture and operates in almost every economy and industry. It has no fixed parameters.

It seems to have a presence in the way we carry out the most ordinary tasks: Purchasing groceries at the self-serve counter often has the experiential feeling of playing a computer game. The screen which was once reserved almost exclusively for video games is now the common form of interface for withdrawing money from banks, managing finances, mortgages and personal information.

This is the same ‘user-friendly’ guidance one might encounter when using a passport to enter a country or to pay for a parking ticket or a phone bill. These common encounters feel ‘Instagramy’. Meals served in cafes seem more ‘designed’ for Instagram than for being eaten. Some cafes even give me the feeling that I have just stepped into Instagram.

There is something about the nature of all of these daily interactions which now bare a strong resemblance to a game. They have acquired the feeling of ‘entertainment-ness’. I am not speaking of technology here, and in fact, to speak of this in relation to technology, or the internet, I feel would be overlooking a more central concern: an ideology which holds at its core the desire to transpose modes of labour into ‘experience’. To hold all activities captive to the principle of *automatism*, which in turn, is to cherish the belief that the absence of labour is a measure of civil progress. Paradoxically, it is labour which is a fundamental constituent in preserving an economy which relies so heavily on exchange values. I would argue that within a regime of entertainment-ness, is the principle that machines should be self-sufficient, autonomous and become naturalised into our everyday lives.

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This dissolving of entertainment into ‘entertainment-ness’ also seems to have introduced a new kind of spectatorship to the way we view Contemporary Art in the context of large institutions, museums and commercial galleries. The viewing expectations placed upon Contemporary Art seems to have grown from a normalisation of virtual and screen interactivity that has an inbuilt spectacle to its modes of presentation. A presentation which seems to have a similar spectacle quality to that of fireworks: the escalation of sensory experience to a sublime and short-lived climax.

It appears that the spectacle of entertainment has created a certain cultural expectation of how the individual participates within a social group event. This is to say, there is a dissolve of the boundaries between the individual and the collective, or more specifically, there is a collapse between subjective and objective experiences of the visual. This is akin to what Maurizio Lazzarato refers to as ‘intersubjectivity’ a collective production of subjective experience in which the individual does not act or think separately or apart from a collective, but is rather, through a spectacle of mass-media, connected to a system of inter-related production. Every activity of the individual is produced in relation to and through an institution, a market, a network in which they become ‘viewer-as-participant’:

“Indeed, it is never an individual or even a group of individuals who work, communicate, or produce. In capitalism, one always works or produces in and through a collective assemblage. In the same way, it is never an individual who thinks, never an individual who creates. An individual who thinks and creates does so within a network of institutions (schools, theatres, museums, libraries, etc.), and sources of public and private financing: an individual immersed in traditions of thought and aesthetic practices- engulfed in a circulation of signs, ideas, tasks – that force him or her to think and create.”

What Lazzarato points out is an inter-connectivity of capitalist assemblages that determines both the production of labour and the distortion of subjective and objective relations in economic terms. In a similar sense, it seems that it is this binding together of ‘intersubjective’ relations that produces a contemporary kind of spectatorship. One in which the viewer is, through the very act of viewing, participating in the binding and tightening of the socio-economic links from one institution to another. The individual is both the contributor to the spectacle and its carrier from one platform to the next. This is to say, that it is the ‘de-individuation’ of a person which is precisely what informs a capitalist notion of spectatorship. The term de-individuation, as drawn upon by Lazarrato, describes the grouping together of individuals into shared activities and exchanges which in turn, rids them of their ‘individual-ness’ and re-frames them as part of a uniformed network, a shared spectacle. Their labour, interests and exchanges become defined in relation to group exchanges, not individual actions. The individual’s activities and exchanges become data, contributors to

11 Maurizio Lazzarato, Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the production of subjectivity, (Semiotext(e). California, USA.) 44
12 Maurizio Lazzarato, Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the production of subjectivity, (Semiotext(e). California, USA.) 44.
statistics and more significantly to defining a globalised view of spectatorship. In response to Giles Deleuze’s concept of the ‘subjectivity’ Lazzarato identifies and elaborates on this as a form of enslavement:

“Subjection produces and subjects individuals, whereas in enslavement “[i]ndividuals become ‘dividuals’, and masses become samples, data, markets, ‘banks’. The dividual ‘functions’ in enslavement in the same way as the non-human component parts of technical machines, as organisational procedures, semiotics and so on.”

Continuing on from this point, the central concern here is how I might be able to communicate these ideas through installations, sculptural forms and artworks that correspond between two and three dimensional spaces. I started to reflect on the idea of an individual body tied to, or even built into a constellation or network of economic currents and flows.

In what ways could I convey the sense of a bodily or figurative attachment and connectedness to a social machine? In response to this question, I started to play with the idea of joining and connecting aluminium piping, which I have cut and fabricated into scaffold-like support structures. This material is essentially a hollow pipe which could appear like plumbing in some contexts, moving liquid or fluid matter from one place to another. I have used it to create geometric parameters and right-angle forms in both wall works and sculptural forms placed on the floor (Image 2.9 Desiring Machines).

Image 2.1 National Anthems. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the Artist. 2018

Image 2.2 Sorting Demon, Artwork by Sean Peoples. Exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary. Image by the artist and Gertrude Contemporary. 2015
http://artviewer.org/sean-peoples-at-gertrude-contemporary/
date of access: 10/09/2018 date of publication 08/15/2015
Having recently seen Sean Peoples 2015 exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary in Melbourne (Image 2.2), I started to notice how his use of piping or tubing was used to convey the sense that brands are fluid content, passing into each other and into other streams of culture. The brands had been re-contextualised into parts of what appeared as a large and complex plumbing device. Peoples’ artworks gave the feeling that cultural signs moved fluidly and in continuity through a machine or factory. The idea of a brand being a formless substance and in constant motion changed the way I perceived of it in relation to liquid matter. It gave the sense that these liquids could be ingested or consumed in a bodily sense. This also gave an expansive and dislocating experience of capitalist flow; the movement of economic growth and a connectivity and integration from one corporate institution into other facets of capitalism.

Peoples’ solo exhibition had a significant influence on how I think about connecting and joining materials in a way that speaks to functionality, subtext, movement, dislocation, re-contextualisation and mapping. Peoples’ use of pipes acted in a very literal way, depicting an actual and realistic experience of socio-economic signs moving into each other as they often seem to do in daily life. What I have started to gather from artist such as Peoples’, is a way of coordinating materials through a design-like methodology in order to expand upon and skew certain experiences and expectations of how design and function can be used to create political readings of social and economic exchange.

Taking into consideration these influences, I then started to incorporate an element of design into the joining together of the aluminium piping, cutting it into various lengths to form display structures. In response to Peoples’ work, I also want to incorporate a brand content into my installations, to direct the work away from a strictly formalist reading. Unlike Peoples’ wall assemblage, these aluminium structures do not convey such a literal idea of fluidity or movement in the sense that a pipe does, but rather they are more designed to prop up or lift objects of the ground, connoting an idea of preciousness and intending to speak of the display’s social role to create value. In this sense, the artworks I make are more concerned with how a display is able to generate value or abstract it in various ways.

The methods I employ are informed by an intention to create a political and satirical commentary of why something is displayed and how this potentially shapes a collective understanding of status. I am using these methods of welding, designing and assembling in order to question the function and use-value of display. Within the following chapters, I will attempt to elaborate on how these methods are formed through a philosophical framework and how this has guided these discussions through the making of large-scale installations.
Chapter 3

The Politic of Materials

Within the artworks I make, the materials are chosen based on certain commercial or social values that operate within them. In this sense, I look for materials that appear to have within them, a political subtext or internal conversation about its cultural or economic make-up. This subtext is often a dialogue surrounding notions of high and low values, status, taste or class structures. Certain ‘high-end’ fashion items or luxury products often appear to have an underlying implication of certain social ideologies.

I often think these ideologies speak to notions of excess, freedom, security, self-enhancement, sex or control among many others. This appears to be communicated through a wide range of forms and images within advertisements, marketing strategies, merchandise, brands and ultimately the product itself. In this sense, I refer to these material investigations as political – commodities which have the capacity to project social ideas regarding hierarchy, division and enslavement and most of all, to obscure the discourse that surrounds them. I often think of how I might be able to activate these conversations or make them speak about structures of affluence from which they came.

The idea that high-end fashion products contain these hidden ideologies informs the way in which I decide which materials to use and how I reconfigure them. By applying specific methods such as juxtaposition, collage, anthropomorphism and re-contextualisation I am attempting to call into question these value systems that are signified through branded commodities and commercial merchandise. A pivotal influence on this process is Thomas Hirschhorn.

Hirschhorn often works with materials based on their capacity to create value regimes outside of already established class structures and binaries between wealth and poverty. In an interview in London, Hirschhorn identifies this framework for how he approaches certain commonplace or cheap materials:

“I wanted to make “poor” art […] quite simply materials that make you think of poverty. To make poor art means to work against a certain idea of richness. To make rich art is to work with established values; It means to work with a definition of quality that other people have made. I want to provide my own definition of quality, of value, of richness. I refuse to deal with established definitions. I’m trying to destabilise them. I’m trying to contaminate them with a certain non-valuable aspect of reality.”

At this time, Hirschhorn makes clear a definitive line between rich and poor materials and where his resistance lies in the use of them. In many respects, socio-economic value is often assigned to cheap materials which have been determined without the material itself having any intrinsic worth.

In our current visual culture, it may be possible to say that brands distinguish these differences but I think it is precisely the brand that creates obscurity in trying to decipher a difference between the class structures and regimes of value that operate within certain materials or objects. I think it is necessary in the context of my own art practice to stress that the arrangement of objects is intended to work against notions of ‘preciousness’ or value in the context of a capitalist economy. This may be possible through recognising the placement and positioning of objects and materials in a way that “subverts” regimes of value.

![Image 2.3 The Subjecters. Artwork by Thomas Hirschhorn. Exhibition held at La Casa Encendida. Image by the artist and La Casa Encendida. 2006](image)

Within the context of an expanded art practice, I aim to understand the cultural values assigned to these objects through branding and to activate these significations through anthropomorphising and connecting these commodities together.

It is within the reconfiguration and assembling of selected objects, that the work intends to embody a labour-less activity so to evoke a rejection of capitalist systems of production which assign abstract values to both labour and the manufacturing of products. In this sense, it seems possible for an expanded art practice to act as a form of critique against notions of status in art and conventional structures of order by disrupting this logic through the placement and positioning of certain objects.
Within this exploration of readymade objects, I am interested in focusing the work towards creating satirical readings of décor or ‘ornamentation’ in the design of expensive commodities. Maybe this could be achieved from a position of degradation – from a position of cheap display. This might also be achieved by the non-functional quality to the support structures I use.

Within these sculptural works, I have replicated the branded display stand one might see in a retail context. This is intended to create satirical readings of corporate presentation and production. These are modes of placement which are intended to satirise formalism and provide an absurdist narrative to the ‘interior design’ aesthetic belonging to corporate culture and domestic settings which embody a kind of luxury aesthetic. Within these object arrangements, I hoped to achieve a kind of ‘emptying out’ of any glamour or opulent atmosphere so that these object arrangements could evoke a sense of institutional austerity and inequality, a ‘feeling’ of economic and political oppression.

In order to denounce a mythologised or romanticised view of an art that is opulent, precious or even immune to the effects of globalisation, it seems that these works could more effectively do so from a point of an iconoclast; an agenda to undermine or subvert sacred symbols or images.

Many of the materials I use in these installations operate within a spectrum of class divisions and structures of wealth, however, these divisions appear to be more obscured, more complex and less identifiable today. They have a multiplicity of readings within these class divisions rather than a more simplified binary set-up between rich and poor.

I think it is necessary that these sculptures and assemblages carry within themselves an awareness of their own contradictions and hypocrisies; that they are as much a contributor to the economic structures of value and excess, to which they direct their criticisms. This is a paradox that I think deepens the inquiry of this research project and adds a complexity to the work - it is not an ‘outsider’ to corporate and capitalist operations.

In light of this, I also think it is necessary that these sculptures, paintings, environments should reflect, in their materiality and presentation, the complicated and contradictory nature of overt suggestions of formalism and museum-like presentations. It seems that in many cases, large art institutions and Museums share a formalist display and layout to the design features, lobbies, stair cases and hand-rails in banks, finance centres and many other corporate architectural features.

This appears to have removed many of the visual cues that help to distinguish between corporate culture and contemporary art. Within the following chapters of this PhD, I will attempt to explain how this combining of corporate and artistic formalism provides an arena
for presentation that confuses the way in which commercial values within Contemporary Art are formed.

Initially, my thoughts of these methods were that if the values which have already been assigned to these objects belong to a capitalist logic then this logic could possibly be questioned through a method of absurdity. Absurdity in this sense, could be described as the disruption of logic, a dislocation of such which allows for new value systems to be created in the domestic or mass-produced object. It is a political means through which a material can reclaim value on new terms. The politics of absurdity is then a methodological direction that navigates and guides the intuitive placement and assemblage of objects. Absurdity also becomes the psychological experience of a dislocation of meaning, the disruption of perceptible logic.

This idea has informed the way in which I determine the placement and weaving together of materials, particularly in works such as Leisure Stick (Swiss Movements). I noticed that if I place an object in a way that it no longer functions as it was intended, it reveals a kind of capitalist ‘rationale’ that was originally entrenched in the shape, design and branding of this object. Logic then, becomes a capitalist measure of rationality and this, in turn, is what guides the methodology of using consumer objects within my work, and how they can be re-contextualised in order to bring to surface a kind of hidden political meaning within my sculptural assemblages.
This also becomes an intuitive process to be able to “sense” ways to disrupt familiar, domestic or commonplace organising systems. These organising systems are noticeable in large furniture stores like Ikea, for example, in which the themed rooms ‘instruct’ the consumer as to how they might furnish their homes. To create a satirical contrast to these systems of organisation and management, I then attempted to use more intuitive methods. These more intuitive approaches were used to push against certain regimes of management and categorisation. A working methodology which aims to critique what I believe is a regime of production, of categorisation and division – the principles that make up a fabric of capitalist logic – the routes through which productivity and value systems move through.

One idea that came about through this process was that when an object is de-constructed, dismantled or turned on its head, it becomes a symbol of ‘civil disobedience’. That the object had within its posture, position and form an inherent politic of order, which becomes recognisable at the moment of its deconstruction. Then it becomes, in its appearance, an image of resistance. It also, however, becomes almost immediately a representation of poverty and decay.

In saying this, it seems that capitalist production sets up a binary system of opposing forces. The design and shape of a mass-produced object either cooperates with an established set of design rules or it is situated as an ‘outsider’- an object which, in the context of an artwork or art gallery, conveys notions of civil disobedience and antagonism. I think it is important to mention here that I am referring to antagonism in the context of contemporary art, within the recognisable and privileged context of an exhibition or gallery. This is a political mapping of every feature and characteristic of any given design object: a chair, a table, a car or phone. Subverting this in any kind of methodological approach, I would argue, is ‘categorically’ labelled as subversion. I believe it is possible to develop, within an expanded art practice, a method of deconstructing, of renewing a set of values assigned to objects by way of placement and arrangement, one which can situate itself outside of this binary relationship.

These materials, which function as cultural signs, have within their display an inherent set of conventions that are loaded with political or social apparatuses. The materials act as a bridge that connects my artworks with certain critical and economic discourses. This capacity is what determines the methodological approaches within this research project.
Chapter 4

**ACTIVE WARE (CALORIE COUNTING) 2016**


*Active Ware (Calorie Counting) was re-made several times with numerous changes to its size, length and sequence of object arrangements. The work was first shown at Realm Art space in Ringwood (2015) for a group show and a second time at the Design Hub at RMIT in the same year. The work was elevated by a white platform which added a formalist quality to the overall installation but more importantly, it was intended to give the installation a chronological narrative. The arrangement of objects in a row threaded into a sequence of events, gestures and moments that explore the psychological dialects of branding.*

*The pieces of furniture and domestic items were chosen based on their capacity to represent the normalisation of amateur culture and the D.I.Y industry that is reflected in house design franchises such as Office Works, Bunnings, Ikea. They are discreet objects manufactured in neutral and muted colours, beige, grey, cream.*
Within the context of this arrangement, the deconstructed chairs, clothes racks and steel frame cabinets aim to reflect a kind of opposition to the false promise of autonomy, control and order that is embedded in the notion of consumer satisfaction. The sequence of readymade objects stretch across a wide range of associations within the sphere of mass-consumerism, reflecting notions of hyper-masculinity, sex, hysteria, desire, adolescence versus old age and patriarchal structures of language and power. The Claude Van Damme poster with a sausage placed at crotch height is not so much metaphorical, as it is literal, however in the context of the overall work can be understood as an absurdist parody of patriarchal displays of control, success and power.

The sausage mounted using clay on an upside-down basket aims to convey a perverse and grotesque display of the irrational mechanisms that function under the surface of consumer culture. The idea that informs this assemblage is that these mechanisms belong to primary and unconscious values surrounding control, fear, security and ego. Here, I have attempted to create a satirical reading of sexual desire as it appears to function in consumerism.

The slapstick and dumb-play of this gesture was used in an attempt to make a literal depiction of the male ego in relation to a phallic symbol. Surrounded by mass-produced sports design logos (Adidas, Nike) this was intended to function as a measure of social power, which posits the male gaze as a force that determines the supply and demand of the commodity in his image. This arrangement is informed by the idea of success pertaining to those who fulfil and realise sexual desire through their own image or by upholding the socio-economic ideology of instant gratification.

Within the far end assemblage on the platform is an image of Jean Claude reclining on the grass with his legs spread wide whilst he strikes a topless pose. There are two elements of the sign here: the male body first, this is the form. And the second, the message being pointed to by the form is hyper-masculinity, sexualised power, a proclamation of desire, control, power, success etc. This is the concept. By distinguishing a separation between the form (male body) and the concept (sexuality, patriarchal structures of capitalist production, power, control, binary notions of heteronormative culture and gender identification). I aim to identify these two components and how they make up the linguistic relationship between the signifier and the signified.

What I am trying to demonstrate here is that the moment this image becomes mythologised as a cultural sign is the very same moment at which we no longer discern the form as distinct from the concept. They become the same thing. We no longer separate the male body from the values it contextually represents. They are woven into the same thing: Jean Claude no longer ‘represents’ hyper-masculinity, sexuality and power. He is hyper-masculinity, sexuality and power.
The sequence of objects then seeks to convey notions of antagonism through the defacement of the image, which relates directly with Van Damn’s smiling face and confident posture with his tanned body sprawled across the lawn. The gesture of defacement seeks to act in opposition to the social and economic constructs of sexualised masculinity, control and instant gratification.

The image of the Hulk and a life-size poster of Van Damme are positioned side by side. As mentioned earlier, JCVD here already embodies the conflating together of two signs, which represents a myth of sexualised power. In which case, I think it is important to identify what these two things are separately:
(1) Form: the male anatomy, the human body.
(2) Content: patriarchal structures of power and control.
(3) Form + Content = mythology of sexuality (the body as desire).
(4) The production of subjectivity through desiring machines. This is the conflation of subjective and objective realities through the blurring of form and content within signification. The manipulation of a collective and individual perceptions of the body.

Both the form and content have merged into one entity in an attempt to create a myth of sexuality. This is to say that the linguistic structures that hold the meaning of ‘sexuality’ have become simplified, (form + content). They have become a comic or cartoon-like representation of its former existence. The Hulk is now the singular representation of the new mythological order. He has spawned from the two signs that merged together inside JCVD

1: male body 2: sexuality, power, control, success. In addition to this, through the process of piecing together this installation it became noticeable that the selection of images and brands evoked the sense that there is a tension between the work of art as the de-valuing mechanism of images and that the re-appropriation of mass-produced consumer-culture images within the artwork makes them more “precious”.

The plastic sausage has been mounted in front of the poster in order to convey the metaphorical depiction of an erect penis. This arrangement of objects was implemented in an attempt to create a symbolic display of patriarchal wealth, control and success. It aims to shift an established perception of the irrational and primal mechanisms of brand psychology that operate under the surface of social structures surrounding control and security. The Hulk neck-rest pillow attached to the metal scaffold shows the green cartoon character juxtaposed against the A1 size poster of Van Damme, both of which have their arms flexed and raised.

Here, the juxtaposition of two figurative images side by side attempts to draw upon a simulacra. The computer-generated image of the Hulk is not a derivative of Van Damn but rather it has become the reality that Van Damn once represented. This is to say that the Hulk has become (in Baudrillard’s terms) the hyperreal. Both images reference pop-culture, however the Hulk is normalised in its artificiality. The presentation of the masculine in its various forms of substitution is the means through which hyper-masculine values and ideologies are explored in this work.

The Hulk is also a sexualised figure – an exaggerated muscular physique with upper body always exposed. This sexualised identification is the normalisation and institutionalisation of a shared experience of a male perception of self. The frequency and rapidity of this image is

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16 Jean Baudrillard, “Hypermarket and Hyper commodity”, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (University of Michigan, 1994), page 75
what normalises it. It is the normalisation that allows for a collective or shared perception to be absorbed by culture: an unconscious belief in what constitutes the male identity. I often think of this as the subliminal function of the adolescent brand, the normalisation of a sexualised, eroticised identity that permeates a wide range of ideals, expectations and fabricated beliefs into a collective psychology.

The linear shape of the installation displays a narrative of objects in sequential order to convey a chronological depiction of “target markets”. From plastic toys for children to walking sticks for the elderly, the selected objects aim to display the various age groups aimed at by the commodity, by the brand as target markets.

The centre steel cabinet is dressed in sweat shirts, running shoes and other forms of active ware. This structure is the highest part of the installation. With plastic chains wrapped around the large steel frame and with inflatable children’s toys attached, the structure becomes an architectural canvas for forming material and cultural readings of the “active wear” industry to pop-culture references and the art institutions. The de-contextualised Rodin Museum poster aims to convey the idea that the established art institutions of the world are not immune from the globalised sphere of marketing and branding.

Furthermore, it seeks to suggest that these artistic establishments do not exist or operate outside of consumer culture or the entertainment industries of late capitalism. On the contrary, these art institutions operate very much from the inside of a hyper-commodified consumer culture. This is the paradox of an expanded art practice today- it can’t escape the very aspects of capitalist culture it may appear to critique and reject.

The aim in building up a display of detritus and fabrics around the steel cage was to anthropomorphise the designer logos- “to make non-living things appear to be living”- as Mark Leckey has described our technological age. I wanted to personify the image of the brand to depict it as a prosthetic form- as a limb or body part, hence the use of shoes attached to suggest that the steel cage has legs, that the inanimate object acquires an anthropomorphic quality by dressing it. The plastic stool rested on top to portray a face or head to the body-like structure.

This is not only to suggest that the brand has become an extension of ourselves, a prosthetic substitute for the collective body of a society, but rather that it has its own autonomous and instinctive desires and wants separate from its maker. This is to explore the idea that brands are living things that have a conscious perspective that separates itself from humanity, like a prosthetic limb that acts on its own accord. However, a brand is not bound to its material form: it is an abstract and socially constructed concept that exists free of material and technological limitations. In opposition to this, Active Ware grounds the brand in materiality and at the same time personifies it.

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17 Mark Leckey’s Youtube video Proposal for a Show 2007 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8QWrLt2ePI
Date of access: 02/02/16. Date of publication: 17/12/2010
WJT Mitchell’s text *What do pictures Want?* addresses the idea of pictures having needs and desires as autonomous living beings, as individual agents that live beyond our authority. In a similar way, I think it is plausible to apply such a framework to the distribution and fragmentation of brands. Primarily because a brand is an image. It is also an economic exchange that represents a transaction in less abstract terms than any other image. Brands are circumscribed to the economic principles of capitalist production and do not exist outside of it. If they do, they become something else.

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18 WJT Mitchell, What do pictures want? The Lives and loves of Images (University of Chicago, 2005)
Chapter 5

Language of Display: Formalism as Corporate Trade

In thinking of formalism as a political aesthetic within the artworks I make, it is usually intended to create subtext, narrative and cohesiveness between the various elements brought together within the sculptures and free-standing paintings. It is also intended to explore ideas surrounding borders, divides and hierarchies. Within the general context of these works, formalism is often used as a parameter, a boundary that organises things and situates objects into some kind of order. Whether it be generated through the use of a platform, a geometric line or a sheet of Perspex, it is applied in the attempt to depict a boarder, a demarcation or catchment. I think that in the more general context of a globalised economy and within institutional spaces, formalism is a governing force which conceals its agenda to control people through its role as a kind of social ‘management’.

Formalism is both a method of instruction and an aesthetic that has given significant direction to the development of the artworks I have recently produced within this research project. It remains a topic in question and trying to understand its origins or its governance seems difficult because it seems as though Formalism, which once dominated a post-minimal art scene (Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin) now is the décor and corporate design of large institutional buildings.

In terms of thinking of how formalism is implemented into my own practice, it is a question of “Who is it for? Who or what does it serve?” Maybe, an attempt to answer these questions will help to understand what formalism means and what its purpose is. Increasingly I notice that large geometric paintings share their formal characteristics with the interior of banks, corporate waiting rooms, lobbies, company offices, lifts and hand rails in Accountancy firms and council buildings. Perhaps this is some attempt to use formalism against the institutional powers that claimed it from the art movements of the 70’s but this is unconvincing based on the willingness of galleries, curators, art fairs and biennial shows to integrate these artworks as décor into these institutional spaces and which rely on the commercial exchange of art as a commodity which fills the board rooms and waiting rooms of corporate offices.

There is something dramatic about these large ‘discreet’ geometric forms that, through design, have built an indistinguishable space between the white cube of the gallery, the sharp-edged object of a painting and the corporate desk, mezzanine floor or coffee table. All these formal qualities (line, form, tone, focal point) are embedded in the language of display—a language that seems to compartmentalises many aspects of domestic life and culture. This is a language that is constituted through segregation, difference, hierarchy, aura and precedence. In this sense, it represents an establishment sequence of status and class: capitalist conventions transposed into an aesthetic geometry; the right angle, straight edged
shape, smooth bevel edged doors and skirting boards, all of which encompass a symbolic connotation as a de-humanised spectacle of authoritarian presence.

Perhaps, before the age of globalisation, these design features stood as the architectural tropes of colonialisation and aristocratic decadence. These geometric motifs that appear throughout the interior of banks, shop fit outs, airport duty free stores and perfume displays trace a history of authoritarian order through design. This seems to be an institutional power that governs and asserts itself through these architectural motifs and through an ordering system of public spaces: how the layout of a room is shaped to make ‘good management’ of the people who occupy that space. Bollards are a modular example of this formalism: they give direction to the shape of queues of people waiting to use ATMs, check-in counters at airports, government services (Centre Link), public toilets. These are formal structures of management which have evolved from one governing regime to another.

This formalist system also governs the order of commodities we inhabit and connect with in a physical sense. For example, the retail display has a different shelf for each commodity based on its locality and function on the body. The display case is a commercial body and the products sit on their protruding platforms at a height that determines its precedence in the ‘order’ of economic value. This is a compositional language that instructs the design features of cars, shoes, furniture - a system of formal rhetoric that encases itself in each of these commodities.

The unobtrusive nature of formalist design within public spaces and commercial settings is most noticeable in architectural features: elevators, hand-rails, background lighting in foyers of corporate buildings. One of the most striking characteristic within a formalist regime is its role within a consumer context, particularly in the use of chrome and aluminium fit-outs used to line the outskirts of shop windows, department stores, hotel lobbies and reception desks.

In a similar sense, the chrome frame around the retail shop shares its appearance with all other retail stores and department stores. The aluminium fitting, a muted chrome frame outlines the spectacle of the commodity and each individual spectacle that is positioned in each window front. This modular design in which the display contains multiple versions of itself, points towards an interchangeability in contemporary art. Artworks that are ‘flexible’ or can be re-assembled to travel from one art fair or continent to the next.

It is a peripheral device; it functions on the outskirts of the spectacle. It acts as an obscuring device. It has a passive muted tone that activates the currency of brands from a removed position, as though it is not to be noticed on the periphery.

These discreet and muted formal designs in chrome and aluminium fittings that make up most of our corporate lobbies, malls, lifts and carparks act as a kind of scaffold and often appear provisional in this sense. The neutral, grey tone of semi-frosted chrome is voiceless and makes up a sort of de-humanised and alien like formalism that encases these public spaces.
For these reasons, the aluminium fitting plays a central role in the construction of my work. I often use these structures to create a parody of merchandise displays such as perfume stands, mannequins, shoe displays, clothing racks. Within the large-scale installations I make, the alloy frame is modular and can be re-configured into a number of geometric forms, mostly used as kind of frame or encasing device.

It acts as a plinth and as a provisional structure to support other sculptures and images. It aims to contribute to the absurdity of these artworks through the seriousness of their appearance. They are often used to lift a commodity off the ground, to give the impression that the floor is ‘beneath’ the spectacle of the commodity and to preserve the opulence of the spectacle and display of wealth and affluence as we see in designer retail and department stores. What interests me about the aluminium frame is its colour; it has an un-obtrusive and bureaucratic tone that is impersonal. It appears corporate and reserved. There are many architectural features that convey this ‘moral grey’, a kind of reserved-ness in its muted tone; marble, chrome fittings, hands-free basins and urinals, hand-rails, elevators. These are discreet and non-descript features within public spaces which I have attempted to extend into more recent floor constructions and installations.

In the following chapter I will elaborate on how this use of display has been implemented into specific work and what methods have been used in order to create certain readings within this work.

The platform, within the context of the artworks I make, over and above being a formal device, is employed to create political significations and is more so an organising apparatus: a
language of display that gives instruction and categorisation to the flow of productivity and value in a directional and linear sense. The platform acts as a run-way, in some respects, which aims to signify a flow of movement, like that of a conveyor belt – a line of productivity that one might see in a factory. Part of the reason for positioning the platforms in this way, is to give the sense that the objects upon them have a chronological order to their arrangement. That they belong to a production of time, of sequential order and a sort of capitalist narrative.

This hierarchy also explores a value system based on the idea that the floor is ‘beneath’ the work, that anything pertaining to the floor is of lesser value and things taller or closer to the ceiling increase in value. Metaphorically, this pertains to ideas of a spiritual orientation, in which the earthed and unearthed are mapped in duality – above and below, heaven and earth, poverty and wealth. In the work titled Country Road (Image 3.0), I have attempted to address how these ideas have been employed into the construction of a large-scale environment and in the bringing together of various cultural objects and materials upon a display platform.

This is a large-scale environment that plays upon the language of display and merchandise. Here, the human figure, comprised of Sports-wear, Ikea furniture and cultural accessories, such as a Wu-Tang t-shirt, is implemented in an attempt to restore authority to the subjective viewer: a kind of substitute for a potential viewer that is not there. The work takes on the physical resemblance of its own viewer in the sense that it ‘views’ itself.

The arrangement of these ready-made images and objects is informed by the way in which commodities acquire their place in an abstraction of meanings; how they solidify certain
ideologies and align themselves with moral and social systems that shape the architecture of brands, the cultural status of objects in relation to their display.

The elevated display is a re-coordination of merchandise: hand-bags, posters, towels outdoor furniture. These items are placed evenly across the white platforms. The figure sitting upright on a chair at the end of the platform is clothed in a series of fashion logos and brands familiar and commonplace within western culture. The figure is intended to represent the psychological space in which we internalise our experience of brands and the cultural signs we know and identify with in commodity form.

This figure has wooden stumps for arms to emphasise the prosthetic nature of its being, that it is a literal and anthropomorphic extension of a corporate body. It is intended to appear as the figurative representation of a collapsed subjective space - an inward experience in which the individual fetishises certain fashion commodities. It is faceless and distorted in order to create readings of a corporate body in a psychological form, an interior space as a body, or more accurate perhaps, a comprised build-up of brands that seek to create the idea of a consumer body. In this way, I am interested in the idea that we construct some notion of self through these cultural signs, through logos and fonts and products. That we see and live through these products and they provide the lens through which we construct our reality. The capacity for a viewer to see their own physical representation in the work seeks to illustrate the authorship of subjective experience, particularly in the way that we psychologically and physically inhabit a brand and our relationship to media in capitalist culture. Whether it be via branding, the digital image, the jpg, Twitter or other forms of social media, it seems as though these are all forms of media saturation that creates a dislocated experience of self, of perception and the way we inhabit a psychological space.

There is a number of contemporary artists who have had a significant influence on the way in which I think about the use of a platform within my work. In particular, the elevated display as a ‘content provider’ can often be seen in Simon Denny’s large-scale installations and environments (Image 3.1). These large-scale stages have an online aesthetic to them as free-standing structures which is conflated into the surface of the platform. Far from being a formal device, the platforms in this context provide much of the visual tropes used in Denny’s work to point towards aspects of online or ‘tech culture’, mass media and the hyper-digital aesthetic of Instagram and other social media platforms. Denny uses a series of heterogeneous images, most of which evolve around social media and the internet in general. In this sense, the elevation is not a framing device but makes up much of the content of the work.
Within the context of my own artwork, the scaffold or platform on which merchandise is positioned in many cases within consumer culture is a divisional apparatus. It is designed to structure and organise commodity values. In some instances, these display units are modular – they are packed down and moved to another location to be re-assembled at another time. This is a quality that informs the making of the large-scale installations I make.

Considering the ways in which Denny has produced such site-specific arenas and modes of presentation, I started to consider the ways in which I could use the platform as a way to create a performative reading of objects that operate above it.
In more recent works such as *Speech and Fog* (Image 3.2) and *Hierophant* (Image 3.3), the stretcher bar of a painting has been deconstructed and positioned on a white platform. The canvas has been separated from the support, cut into large areas and stapled back to the stretcher bar as a detached surface. The elevated display of these deconstructed paintings is directed at emphasising the theatricality of these assemblages. The surface relationships within and behind the canvas aims to convey these human characteristics, as free-standing structures that, metaphorically, are intended to function as animated bodies.

The scaffold-like construction is made from the wooden stretcher bar of the painting in order to function as a sort of hybrid between painting and a modular display system. The behind view of the structure allows the viewer to see the exposed raw canvas, screws and patch work that is keeping the structure upright. The marks and gestures are exposed at the rear of the construction in order to create a reading of surface value. A stage-like presentation of the image, which offers little in the way of opulence or possibly even gives a sense of disappointment with the shoddy use of materials used in its interior. The aim of this layout was to create a contradictory reading of value; the height and large-scale of the work presenting the art object with grandeur and decadence, and on the other hand, using cheap and shoddy materials to undermine it as having low-brow status.
In the making of the installation *Hierophant*, I decided to hang a pair of Adidas sports pants over the stretcher bar beside a large canvas, which has been painted in black and grey. In doing this, I wanted to explore the possibility that the stripes on the pants could create a narrative which could extend the objecthood of the painting into a site-specific installation. The relationship between the marks and gestures on the canvas and the lines on the sports pants were intended to create a formal correspondence between object and image. I had hoped that through the re-contextualisation of painting, the chosen objects situated next to it became emptied of cultural significance and acted as an extension of gestures or marks. I think this removed the Adidas pants from its cultural logic so that it could be read, not only as a formal device but more as a de-humanised object – a visual prop emptied of its figurative function to be worn on the body.

![Image 3.3 HIEROPHANT (Major Arcana) Acrylic paint, spray paint, wood, screws, staples, cut out of sports pants sleeve. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2017](image)

In developing display structures that bring a political, social or formal context to the work, there are a number of artists who have informed this process and influenced the expanding development of support structures and displays within my practice. The platform or elevated structure is often used by many contemporary artists. In some of these examples the display structure is almost more important than the object on display and is often used to subvert or create satirical readings of a museum-style presentation.
Paul McCarthy’s exhibition at Hauser and Wirth in London titled *The King, The Island, The Train, The House, The Ship* (Image 3.4) is an example that demonstrates both the contrast between the neutrality and banality of a chrome conveyor belt or scaffold-like structure used as a display device to uphold a grotesque and highly politically charged sculptural rendering of George W. Bush having sex with 3 pigs. The supporting device, which supplies an electronic circuit to animate the moving sculptures has a dual function. First, it is a support structure that elevates the work above head height of the audience that enter the room. It also stores the electrical circuit that provides a kinetic element to the work. The robotic movement guides the elevated figures to point their gaze at the surrounding viewers. In this instance, the display is discreet and un-interrupting in contrast with the bright orange/peach colour of the pigs moving robotically upon the steel frame.

In this case, the display is functional for its electrical supply to the above mass but it also acts politically, upon hierarchical values by elevating the work to a scale that shrinks the viewer. The animated bodies are well above head height and look down at the viewer. The figures are wired to a sensor that prompts the heads of the sculptures to turn towards the viewer directing their gaze directly at anyone who enters the room. In this way, the display heightens the scale of the work to allow the gaze of the rolling heads to move menacingly back at the viewer. The sculptures of the former president are eroded and slightly chipped, the torso and body of the president is cartoon-like and bares a strong resemblance to the pigs also on display. In this sense, the figurative subjects indicate a sense of decay and erosion. Metaphorically this points to wider discussions regarding American politics and notions of democratic process.
Again, the discreet platform here provides a formal contrast to both the colour, texture and visual information within the sculptures rested up high. The conveyor belt, also speaks metaphorically to a chain of mass-production within the display. This is to say that the linear form of the display points towards an idea of a grotesque product rolling down the conveyor belt in continuity and excess.

In a vastly different approach, Dan Arps’s 3 AM in THE MORNING at Minerva Gallery in Sydney (Image 3.5) demonstrates the use of a stack of off-white stools that form a patterning order within the free-standing structure that is made into a kind of plinth in and of itself. The use of readymades in repetition forms a patterning that speaks to the ubiquity and accidental occurrence of support structures through the movement and ordering of furniture.

In this example, Arps has used a stack of stools to elevate a plastered object resting on a plastic cup. The legs of the stools stacked upon each other form a patterning within the organising system of the objects layered together.
The display structure speaks of a sociological connection of objects. As a plinth, it appears as a figurative object in the sense that it alludes to the body by way of its function. In this sense, it also connects the viewer to the absence of a figure. What interests me is how objects have the capacity to signify the absence of something in their presence. When many stools are compressed into a singular object like this, there is a sense of many figures or perhaps more so, the management and organising systems of a mass of bodies merged together. This is a type of modular organising system. It appears to reflect on the management of people more so than the products they use. The political and sociological reading of the stacked or compressed stools is realised through its role as a ‘social’ display: it traces the way in which people ‘fit into’ an assigned place within capitalist production. By way of forming a pattern
and staggering effect of the stools, it becomes a totemic form which gives the sense of a tracing together and mapping of human activity.

In both of the above examples, the use of the display, or more specifically, the development of a cultural or social context provided by a support points towards a shift in the way in which we experience these structures as organising systems. I have tried to incorporate these readings into a number of various installations and environments which I will discuss in the following chapters.
Chapter 6

The Corporate Body

It seems as though the ‘spirit of Capitalism’ today encompasses a certain attitude about its operations; that images in the commercial realm are faithful to the things they represent. And although this may be commonly dismissed as false, what is of interest here is how, despite knowing this, images in the commercial realm of exchange continue to gain authenticity, legitimacy and in some instances, have become bearers of truth. Our collective obsession with being connected to images, using them as a means of self-expression, embedding them into local infrastructure, economic models, agricultural industries and education systems is evidence of our devotion to the visual realm.

Baudrillard refers to these cohesions, in the social collective sense, as a matter of whether we believe in it or not. This is probably a more accurate use of the word; it is a matter of belief that determines the nature of an image as a bearer of truth:

“So even though we may be getting better and better at resisting advertising in the imperative, we are becoming more and more susceptible to advertising in the indicative - that is, to its actual existence as a product to be consumed at a secondary level, and as the clear expression of a culture. It is in this sense that we do indeed believe in advertising: what we consume in this way is a luxury of a society that projects itself as an agency for dispensing goods and ‘transcends itself’ in a culture. We are thus taken over at one and the same time by an established agency and by that agency’s self-image.”

It is commonly accepted that advertisements are not recognised as such, as bearers of truth, but what is unconsciously normalised is that their role in the organisation and compartmentalisation of socio-economic movement is imperative, and so, it is necessary, it is essential for us to see a bus-size image of a toilet cleaner. Not because toilet cleaners are bearers of truth, but rather that the system that has brought it into existence, that which it represents, is imperative. In this sense, advertising, branding has become a kind of truth; an irreducible trace of social correspondence, a measure of humanity in some respects. We can see our physiology, our pathology in the presentation of commodified images, as a printed expression of a social body.

19 “We shall call the spirit of capitalism the ideology that justifies the engagement in capitalism and which renders such engagement desirable. It is precisely because it is the object of critique that capitalism is led to being justified. In the absence of critique, justification would be needles.”


The design and architecture of the brand can play a large role in giving legitimacy to images as a form of currency and as a device that gives form to the rise and fall of socio-economic values. The term branding is duplicitous in the sense that it can also be used to describe a commercial system of movement and distribution. It is a social construction propelled through and into an exchange value. More accurately, images galvanise their ‘reality’ by simply being there. Their presence in the public space legitimises their right to ‘speak’ and, simultaneously removes them from their authors. The person(s) who makes the advertised image and delivers it to us is dissolved and dismantled through the collective production of an outward pouring of rotating advertisements and moving pictures. We are not corresponding with an author through these images- the image is its own author, it is represented by a corporate body.

Public consent for the presence of any image is ‘engineered’ by the alienation of the image, its removal of personhood. We are, in this instance met with an abundance of nameless, faceless, authorless images. The only author that will put their name and face to these images is that of the corporate body, an organisation, a large block of money that is a body in its own right. The corporation operates and lives through human labour but it is a series of economic flows and movements. It is the only accountable representative body to speak for these commercial images and their place in the world. This notion of a corporate body is elaborated on by Brian Droitcour in his essay in Art After the Internet, who explains;

“Corporation are people’ as Mitt Romney once said. The corporation is a social technique by which a group of people acts together as one, in order to make money, to make things happen, to create changes and disturbances in a society and in the social world. How does the corporation do it? How does the corporation unite so many bodies to achieve its ends?

It does it with branding. Corporations are people but their bodies are huge and grotesque. Its avatars – the real people – have stunted bodies. Their impulses and affects are subjugated to the fluid discourses of a brand identity; they speak the stilted business tongue of power point slides and memos. We live in the time of corporate personhood- when corporate bodies perlocutionary corporate speech make the models of how a person should be.”

This unwritten exchange disguises a central point- images are bodies, they are made as bodies, in our own image. However, they have become fragmented and distorted, pulled into different directions by social absorption and interactivity. They do not look like people however, they are the activity of people in a measurable currency.

This idea of an image becoming a body informs the way in which I have started to create geometric and modular shapes: installations that have within their colour, design and frame-like appearance a corporate aesthetic and opulence. I am interested in how the up-right positioning of the frame amplifies its human appearance in which it acts as a sort of

21 Brian Droitcour, You Are Here: Art after the Internet, (London, HOME and SPACE, 2017), 46
‘machine-body’. Its upright positioning and extended limbs are used to elevate or prop-up smaller sculptures. If the image can be considered a body, then perhaps so can the brand as they often are the same thing. In thinking of the brand as a body, I started to think of how it is used to connect people. I also started to think of how I could re-contextualise it or employ it into my sculptures and installations in order to convey this idea of a corporate machine that consumes and lives through a series of interconnected parts.

Image 3.6 Desiring Machines (Dolce & Gabbana). Brass constructed frame, Perspex, plaster, adhesive, charcoal on canvas. Canvas Dimensions: 153 x 107.5 cm. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2018
In the work titled *Desiring-Machines (Image 3.6)* for example, I have used the fashion designer logo in the form of a sticker which runs along the exterior frame in order to create the appearance of a continuous and repeating message, like the scrolling text which runs along the bottom of the TV screen when watching the news. This work is painted gold for the reason that gold is often used to signify the top end of a class structure: frequent flyer memberships use gold to classify its ‘premium’ members. Silver, gold, platinum are all colour-coordinated ways of allocating people to levels of consumption within the world of rewards cards, memberships, credit cards and loyalty points. Gold is often used to convey a corporate aesthetic within particular institutions and companies.

The structure has the text *Dolce and Gabbana* running along the outside of its frame. The intention for this was to create a satirical reading of ‘Art-as-merchandise’. That the work of art is embedded in the same support structures that one might see in a commercial or retail context. I was interested in the idea that the display had a kind of ‘body language’ in which it extended itself or ‘reached’ around objects in order to envelop them or bring them into a web of cultural readings and correspondences.

In the making of the large drawing and by applying charcoal onto raw canvas, I have used letters and words to compose the image. I wanted to create an image that conveyed the idea of a ‘broken language’, a depiction of written structures that have dissolved or collapsed into the canvas or like a stuttered speech that was communicated in written form. Most of the research surrounding this piece is informed by the notion that brands are a distortion or skewing of linguistic sign structures or written language in general. For this reason, I attempted to compose a loosely drawn image that aimed to convey a ‘feeling’ of this distortion of language. That the proliferation of consumer signs had nested within written symbols in the sense that they now serve as only a spectacle apparatus rather than carriers of language.

Prior to this work being completed, I had made a number of similar designs (*French Partition* image 1.6), which were also made with the intention to build the display into the work itself in order to convey the idea of the artwork becoming ‘self-sufficient’ – not needing to be elevated upon a plinth or support because it provides its own. It is both a support and the object being supported. I have attempted to convey the idea of a modular design which suggested that it is provisional or temporary. That it could be packed down and re-assembled somewhere else at a later time. And that it had continuity, the suggestion that the structure could be added to with additional parts. In this sense, the work aimed to convey the reading of contemporary artwork as a flexible and conveniently designed object.

These are the kind of ‘sell-able’ features advertised in Ikea furniture or advertisements for exercise kits that can be packed down to fit in a cupboard or under a bed (convenient to store). I was interested in the idea that Contemporary Art can be modular, in which case it shares its design and form with all other current merchandise. To my mind, this appears to cheapen, or lowers the ‘cultural status’ of Contemporary Art, making it domestic and able to
‘fit in’ to the everyday lives of people’s homes or living room areas. A spectacle or viewing apparatus that can be stowed away.

I think the absurdity or humour in this lies within the associative values attached to ‘fixed’ structures like we might see in a museum rather than modular, compactable structures which are available to everyone in excess. In some sense, it seems that malleable structures have an underlying subtext that ties the commodity to a notion of ‘throw-away’ culture. Things that can be packed away are cheap like a camping chair or a fold-out table. More expensive or ‘tasteful’ commodities are not modular – objects made out of solid brass or antique furniture. I think the associative value tied to these more permanent structures suggests that their unmalleable form gives them more ‘conviction’. They are permanent, meaning they are more serious commodities which are ‘above’ the common and everyday objects that are produced in excess.

Within *Desiring Machines*, I wanted to create an artwork that resembled a perfume stand or a costume display one might see in the front window of a shop. The point of this was to create an artwork which confuses and distorts what remaining boundaries there are between contemporary art and the shopping mall. Within the development of this work, I have started to reflect on the idea that the shopping mall and the art museum share a historical link to the cathedral. The alter or sacred space of a cathedral seems to inform the formalist language used in corporate aesthetics and within the minimalist language belonging to both museums and shopping malls. A contemporary British artist who has influenced my thinking on these relationships is Matthew Darbyshire, who recently produced a number of cathedral-like statues that were exhibited in Selfridges shopping mall (Image 3.7). Darbyshire identifies this relationship in discussion of his recent exhibition at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in England:

“I had a bit of a breakthrough whilst walking around the Selfridges store and suddenly realising the similarity between shopping emporium and museum layouts. […] I thought back further and realised that the Roman and Greek temples informed the cathedral which informed the museum and the museum informed the mall – so, if shopping is the new religion, the brands are the new icons that, regardless of faith, race or creed, unify us all. I then realised that we’d come full circle and that the main brands today in fact derive from the classical deities first shown in ancient temples, then in cathedrals, museums and now in the ultimate secular temple –the store!”

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In many ways, these are aesthetic motifs used within the fashion brands to create an ‘experience’ within the act of consumption. *Desiring-Machines* was also intended to create a play upon the ‘helpfulness’ of the display as a means to optimise viewing experience: presenting everything conveniently at head height and sculptures presented on small plinths but not too low that you have to bend down to see them.

In this way, the display is a conversion of human activity into design: its size, shape and height is completely governed by how people look at things, and in response to this, it distorts or bends itself accordingly. It is a discreet servant which reduces the physical nature of looking into a spectacle.
Chapter 7

The Glitch: Alienation and the Body

Within this chapter I identify a theoretical framework that informs the development of my practice. In particular, this area of discourse focuses on a central theme surrounding Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra: the ability to create a dislocated experience of what constitutes the real and what substitutes it. Baudrillard’s text, *Simulacra and Simulations* widens the direction of this research project and contributes to the way branding can be thought of and perceived in relation to how it becomes normalised in its excessive presence and by distorting the real by creating false contrasts, a false sense of otherness, and of poverty as a polarised opposition to wealth.

In some respects, this is what Adam Curtis refers to as the ‘hyper normalisation’ of the commodity and its presence in the public realm. One whereby the commodity is its own advertising, one which is built into the scaffold, the display case and enveloping structures that surround it. This is a phenomenon I often notice in the contrast between the window displays in a shopping mall and the architectural surroundings of the streets outside. The window display and its glossy presentation of merchandise is often seen as a signification of wealth and status. The opulence of the display which encases and elevates the commodity creates a deliberate contrast to the detritus, the graffiti, the rubbish bins and the accumulation of litter on the outside street. This appears as a contrast between the significations of poverty and that of wealth. It is the forming of a boundary and a divide which separates a place to consume to that which exists outside of it.

This is more the appearance of a set of architectural binaries: high and low, interior / exterior, order / disorder. The simulacra here is that these are contrasting binaries within consumer culture which are all constructed by the same regime of capitalist production. The structures and internal hierarchies of commodities rely on this binary to create a spectrum - varying degrees of classification, which allow for ‘mid-range’ or ‘entry-level’ commodities to proliferate. This is the instance in which the financial institutions and corporate sectors that govern the appearance of ‘high value’ also creates the spectacle of ‘low value’ in order to keep the illusion of balanced scales, and does so from a concealed position. In other words, high and low are both cut from the same fabric of institutional order. The very management of this fabric is to preserve these polarities as having a perceived conflict of interests within culture. They must, at all times, appear to be in opposition to each other in order to survive and to evoke their public consumption.

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23 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, (University of Michigan, 1994)

The simulacra here is the ability to create a spectacle which convinces its on-lookers that ‘the grunge’ belongs to a different political wing to its corporate counter-part. That the making of such a spectacle creates a distraction from the reality that these perceived points of difference are made by the same corporate and governing body. Adam Curtis refers to this as a psycho-political strategy called perception management.

The U.S military and Department of Defence describe this as “a propaganda technique that involves carefully altering the perceptions of a target audience to suit the objectives of the sponsor, and is an essential part of modern information warfare [...] how selective information is provided (or denied) to a target audience to influence their emotions, motives and objective reasoning in order to promote a change in behaviour that is favourable to the sponsor.”

The brand is a simulacrum, it is the reduction of signs, the erasure of symbols to mere recognition, or as a shift in perception from the ‘say-able’ to the ‘see-able’. In particular, this calls into question one particular capacity of the brand. It binds the social, the spectacle and the economic facets of globalised visual culture by means of iconography; the reduction of language to moments of recognition. Branding, due to its hybridised character evades definition and obscures a perceivable space of difference that exists outside of the hyperreal, one without the excessive opulence of the commodity and display of wealth that makes up the everyday world.

I would propose that branding is not an icon of advertising or limited to a series of slogans (although it is often both of these things). More significantly, the normalisation of the commodity appears as a fetishistic spectacle, one that removes any opposition to its expansive architecture or any memory we have of an encounter or experience without it. This is most evident in shopping malls, in the neutral aesthetic of newly developed town houses and the chrome gloss fittings allocated to newly designed franchise department store. Adorno refers to this homogenisation as a mechanism of the culture industry, one which de-humanises the commercial public space.


26 Department of Defence (2001), "Department of Defence Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms", Joint Publication 1-02, 12 April 2001 (As Amended Through 17 December 2003): “Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning as well as to intelligence systems and leaders at all levels to influence official estimates, ultimately resulting in foreign behaviors and official actions favorable to the originator’s objectives. In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, [1] operations security, cover and deception, and psychological operations.”

This concept helps to understand the alien-like design features we now see in cars, running shoes, sports-wear, smart-watches and smart phones. The fetishistic object as de-humanised. Not sub-human, rather alien. In some sense, it is the “alien-ness” of commodities that elevates them to objects of desire: through their sterility and function as a brand.

On the contrary, desire is eclipsed by logic, it is the dwelling in a psychological space that becomes the new commodity, a commercial and ‘de-individuated’ production of subjectivity that occurs in the human body: the physical constituent for a psychological space in which the asignifying operation of merchandise commences. This is, in some respects, what is meant by ‘internalising the spectacle’. A capitalist production of subjectivity, in which the individual becomes an integral component, an input or output in the economic flow of ‘asignifying’ networks.

The alien, (if we may call it that) creates a schism within the consumer, a false and internal ‘other’, which solicits the sense of wanting. In this context, I think of the alien as an abstract concept. It symbolises a limitless-ness, a universality, a phenomenology of something unearthed. This limitless-ness is sublime and conveys the image of something that is beyond the capacity of the human body – to be non-human and perhaps it could be said that it conveys an analogous relationship to God.28

This abstraction of reality is not exclusive to individual products and is rooted even more so within the architectural spaces which are made for consumption. The hyper-commodity is an image-ness that permeates every aspect of culture and reduces a visual experience to having no “other”. The advertisement, the display case, the brand and the commodity become all the same thing: a seamless experience of the fetishistic spectacle. It eclipses the memory of what came before it by obscuring and distracting from the memory of an architecture before total globalisation. In a similar sense, this is what Norman Klein refers to as a history of forgetting.29 I think of this as, not so much forgetting, but more so, remembering what an ‘unglobalised’ culture felt like. Remembering what culture or commodities felt like before the ‘atmosphere’ of globalisation was omnipresent and when technology did not have the aura of sophistication which it has today.

It is when the interior skeleton of the shopping mall is exposed for renovation or a new ATM is being installed or a fault is exposed in the uninterrupted architecture around the hyper-commodity that corporate space unveils an alternative to itself. By exposing the techniques used to uphold the mechanism that creates the illusion, the skeleton of capitalism is revealed.

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28 i-cloud, for example has an ‘omnipotent’ suggestiveness to its title, a cloud, a formless shape that is ‘above’ us, perhaps even that watches down on us. The Nike swoosh symbol originated from the Greek Deities of victory.

29 Norman Klein, The History of Forgetting; Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory. (London, Verso, 1997)
These momentary “glitches” are an instance of experiential dislocation when the earth matter that makes up these architectural spaces is revealed by accident. A flickering light in the elevator. Or when there is a glitch in the K-Mart soundtrack on the overhead speaker.

The glitch in the fluorescent light fittings, the escalator or the neutral down-lighting in faux marble bathrooms unveils a false opulence. The “lounge aesthetic” is made up of neutral colours (beige) and user-friendly aluminium hand-rails and touch screen monitors for information points (You are here).

The glitch is also in the slippage between the shiny new interiors and accidental spills and detritus. The Peri-Peri sauce spilling down the side of the chrome recycling bin: a scratch in the aluminium fittings: the coffee stain on the beige or teal fabric couch in the public lobby reveals to the consumer “the hand of the puppeteer” by accident. It exposes the earth matter underneath the veneer of opulence. The glitch is equivalent to the prisoner escaping Plato’s cave only to realise the casting of shadows was merely an effect of reflections caused by the radiance of the sun.

This is an experience whereby the corporate aesthetic, the franchise or globalised appearance of a stage reveals by accident, its own fallibility, its temporality. But this is not in its entirety an authentic experience of truth being revealed. It suggests, that the skeleton, the exposed sub-structure of a building, the earth matter and raw material represents a substance which belongs to the ‘outside’ of a capitalist production, which is false.

The glitch reveals the hand that is concealing the glitch. The concealing hand persuades its onlookers that it is less “real”, less authentic than the object it conceals. Anything that conceals or obscures is in opposition with any attempted understanding of reality. It reveals “the other” as the authentic representative of the real. This is the complete success of the simulacra: convincing the audience that there is such a thing as ‘other-ness’. Signifying the object being concealed as the genuine article, of which it is not- rather it is a distraction from the reality of its concealment. It reminds us that its concealing nature is its own reality and which is true. This is the moment when, even though it has been exposed it still remains the normalised and legitimised version of the real – the hyper-real.

It is a substitutive effect whereby the commodity convinces its consumers that it exists outside of itself; a commodity that acts as a chameleon; it mimics the appearance of a non-commodity, an ‘outsider’, a false object of dis-order and ‘anti-establishment-ness’. It engineers its own aura, a spectacle which congratulates itself as being inimitable.

Within the wider context of my art practice, I often think of how the theme of Simulacra influences the visual narratives and outcomes I am hoping to achieve in my work. How the placement and layering of materials and images might speak to these areas of discourse surrounding brands and the mass-produced commodity.
In works such as *Dream Weaver* (Image 3.8), I wanted to coordinate these objects in a way that examined ‘grotesque’ representations of nature in commodity form. *Dream Weaver* is given human-qualities through the placement of its components; the helmet facing forward and the sports-pants laying across the back end of the platform. I wanted to explore the idea that desire is being suspended through alienation. That is to say, that the desire for the commodity is strengthened when it is further removed from human resemblance (flesh, hair, fluid) or anything that reminds us of death. This is a floor work comprised of a motorbike helmet, Adidas pants and a branch of plastic bamboo extending over two concrete blocks. I wanted to create a correspondence between the glitch-like patterning on the helmet to the digital image that had been printed out and layered across the platform.

This work is an early example of how these readymade objects, in contrast, are intended to lower the cultural status of art objects by placing them closer to the floor. However, this is not absolute; the white plinth is used in a museum style format to elevate these arranged objects only a few centimetres off the floor. In this sense, what may seem ambiguous in this work is whether these objects have been designated as precious or whether they are subordinated to a state of banality and commonplace. The white platform is what I think makes this unclear.

I initially thought of the helmet as a shell that encompasses and wraps around the head – it becomes a cultural signification of a mask more so than a protective device. Something that conceals the face. This prompted the idea of thinking of it as an object of effacement. In this sense, I started to think of how it might behave metaphorically in depicting a psychological space, signified by its concealment of the face. A signification of subjectivity or a
psychological ‘shell’ in which the human form is situated or concealed. The object started to bring to light the idea that masks don’t conceal an interior but rather point towards what is behind them – they ‘point to’ a concealment rather than actually concealing.

The placement of the objects was informed by an absurdist methodology and also an attempt to create a narrative pertaining to the body. Both a figurative narrative but also one that corresponds with the platform, in which case it functions as an island. By bringing together an array of heterogeneous cultural objects, I was attempting to play upon this absurdist logic in order to create an abstract reading of the ‘body language’ of commodities. The narratives don’t complete themselves in many respects; the figurative element is only suggestive of, but not complete or literalised by only having the pants sleeve draped over the back of the assemblage. I think the helmet is the only signification that refers to the body completely. The use of anthropomorphic methods in works such as this are employed to activate a subtext that I believe is embedded in the objects used in these configurations. As animated bodies, I felt I was able to make them ‘speak’ of these subtexts and even more so, communicate the economic causes and conditions that brought these mass-produced objects into the world.
Chapter 8

Psychology of branding and atmospheric value

French Lavender. Alpine Breeze. Maple Spruce

The following chapter explores the use of collage and juxtaposition in relation to certain themes surrounding advertising and marketing strategies which are carried out through image and text relationships. In particular, a number of studio experiments and more resolved installations and large-scale wall works have been selected to demonstrate some of these discussions in visual form. These works are produced in order to further examine the concept of the glitch and its perceptual characteristics in consumer culture.

In these earlier stages of the research project, I had attempted to make an example of formal connotations and atmospheric values that are played out through branding by way of layering and staggering printed images and advertisements on top of each other.

Through a series of studio developments, I continued to explore this idea of a glitch, particularly in the work French Lavender 2015 (Image 3.9) and later in Ladder 2017 (Image 4.0). In the first experiment a digital print of lavender was framed and two packets of toilet
cleaners were glued to the surface of the image. On the packaging is an image of a wave emerging from the ocean. The image embedded in the product is intended to act as a political device: it connotes two ideas by way of juxtaposing two images: authenticity and nature.

The toilet cleaner, through the use of the colour blue and an image of a wave, does not signify nature but rather it connotes the idea of nature. Again, this is an abstraction of the sign. The aim of this collage was to create readings of excess, to create an absurdist, if not humorous reading of the mass-produced and unsustainable production of disposable and throw-away products. The work was focused upon ways in which advertising and branding use colour relationships, texture and font to override obvious contradiction between ‘nature’ and capitalism. This is a formal linking to nature, an image of a wave, a dolphin, a bird, a serene lake.

As mentioned earlier the image becomes a form of rhetoric, it situates the commodity in culture by creating formal significations of ‘morality’ as its spectacle and does so because the design features that it uses contain pre-existing significations. There is a conflation between value and the representation of value. The toilet cleaner no longer symbolises morality and ecological awareness, it is morality and ecological awareness. It conflates the signifier and the signified, the concept and the form become one and the same thing. This can be achieved because the chosen colour, symbolically, already has existing meanings that have been established in its historical use.

In Ladder (Image 4.0), I have staggered an image of the Dove shampoo bottle up through the centre of the collaged surface of the painting. Partly this was to examine a kind of ‘digital glitch’ through an analogue process. The digital image that functions as a failure or collapse of technological production of the copy, a pixilation of the surface image.

The other aspect of this work was to use the iconography of a white dove to convey a transcendental symbol of the commodity as salvation, a god-like icon that asserts the moral representation of Capitalism. This is, in more specific terms, using a layering of the mass-produced image to create readings of its unconscious psychological values embedded in the cosmetic commodity. The white dove, an icon of purity and innocence conveys this moral reading that acts as a sort of cleansing of its consumer.

This suggestive atmosphere, this aura of ‘natural-ness’ is embodied in a whole range of bird icons – particularly in the holographic Visa logo of the Dove. Singapore Airlines use a similar iconography. By re-contextualising these symbols for corporate use, it deprives them of any broader analytical reading in terms of what they mean: the wave (or dove) as a form, a shape, a geographic study, a subject within marine biology, an object of physics etc. It is now simplified or reduced to a base-level connotation in this instance. This iconography implies something social, something moral or sentimental or mythical. Myth, in this sense creates intimacy in places where there is none.
I think what myth constructs here is a reduced and simplified implication of something sincere but devoid of actual meaning. This is played out through formal suggestions which mimic original semiotic systems but are essentially empty of any genuine signification. This is injecting one sign into another - giving moral significance to the word/image relation of ecology. Through its re-purposing and mass distribution, it infuses these suggestions into visual culture.

This recognition relies on a socio-economic value that the image is authentic or upheld as truth rather than a simulated, substitutive mode of representation. So now, what is being examined here, is a tracing of the links from moral sentiment of the brand to authenticity – both of which operate through aesthetic design. It is the atmosphere of authenticity that is being transmitted through an abundance of aesthetic strategies we see in merchandise displays and rotating LED screens on the side of buses.

In many ways, authenticity has been transposed and obscured into the commercial appearance of sincerity through colour: beige, off-white, muted greys, pistachio, camel and navy. Within the cosmetic department this is mostly achieved through the use of creams and off-whites: the whites of moisturisers, toothpaste, shampoos and even interior designs, bathrooms and kitchens- architectural spaces pertaining to the body as a symbolic alter of essence and purity. An example here is the multinational skin care company Aesop, which uses a brown or earth-like aesthetic in all its merchandise and packaging. This appears to signify a ‘natural’ authenticity. I started to notice many other companies which also use a similar aesthetic or ‘brand personality’ in their advertising. It was these initial areas of discussion that informed my interest in the Dove shampoo logo, which I later used as a central motif in the work Ladder. I often look for brands that demonstrate how these colour associations are used to convey notions of purity, innocence or transcendence. This is something I thought could also be enhanced through textural correlations.

Typography, font, scale and colour within brand designs are all used to legitimise and form a resemblance of a moral or ethical “atmosphere”: blue or green becoming the signifier for ecology or something organic. It has become a marketable and commercial form of rhetoric, which is mythologised as a connotation to nature. Authenticity is the concealment of affluence through the production of a particular kind of commodity. One which stands in opposition to any display of wealth and expensive goods. The authentic commodity, in this instance is aided by a set of atmospheric values pertaining to something hand-made, something organic or even ‘rustic’ or continental.

Erika Balsom, in her essay in Art After the Internet elaborates on this point: “access to the authentic, after all, as being fairly exclusive. Understood in this second sense, the desire for authenticity is no escape from commodity fetishism but its apotheosis: it is a way of

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30 Aesop is a multi-national Australian skin care franchise that sells moisturisers and other skin care products. Aesop has shops throughout Europe and America.
dissimulating a relationship to economic privilege by cloaking a yearning for the rare and expensive in spiritual, Romantic terms.”

In many rustic and worn textures, consumer culture has unto itself an entire faculty of myth pertaining to authenticity-as-sincerity, signifying the atmosphere of old ‘country style’ worn barns, Art Deco soap holders and bathtubs with claw foot elevation. One in particular that has a more profound effect on the proliferation of the authentic sign in the commodity is those pertaining to the ocean and salt erosion; a romanticised myth of the sea. Rusted Ladders, rope, or faded coffee tables, fishing nets or detritus from old ship wreckages. This ‘faded look’ has become part of a motif I have used in smaller wall-assemblages, using clay and plaster to create a faded appearance of cultural detritus that has aged. In works such as Plastic Grammar (Image 4.2), I have attempted to use clay and plaster to create a patina effect, in which the work was intended to convey an ‘archaeological’ reading of pop-culture objects—using these materials embedded in clay to depict them as ‘findings’, ruins or remains - as tracings of a previous time.

I: Alpine Breeze

Alpine Breeze (Image 4.1) is another small work made in order to examine a contrasting of synthetic mass-produced products and raw earth-based materials such as clay, plaster or wood. This composition is intended to create political narratives and to examine the ways in which marketing and packaging uses formal elements to create the image of a company’s moral orientation and allegiance with target audiences. These visual strategies contribute to the ‘sentiment’ and ambient values which are in themselves political signifiers of personalisation: The corporation which markets itself, through the image, as individualistic in their ethical conduct or ‘grassroots’ approach. This personalisation aims to dismantle the reality which is that a corporation is a constituent of many bodies and thus its moral and ethical conduct is determined not by an individual but through the management of a large number of people. The personalisation strategy, which is to turn the appearance of a company into a person cannot be translated in real terms, but it is possible to construct the image of this through formal and naturalistic iconography - advertising. These marketing strategies employed to create an atmosphere of ‘natural-ness’ are carried out particularly within the industry of cosmetics.

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31 Erika Balsom, You Are Here; Art After the Internet; Against the Novelty of New Media: the resuscitation of the Authentic, (Manchester UK, published by HOME, 2014), 67.
Image 4.1 OLD ALPINE BREEZE. Wood frame, clay, gold leaf, plastic ikebana leaf, plastic grid, accordion, children's toy railway piece, packaging from motorcycle cover. Dimensions approximately 60 x 40 x 7 cm. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2017

Alpine Breeze was developed in an attempt to expand upon the sensation of an archaeological finding; the idea of excess detritus and snippets of discarded packaging and products which are rendered as artefacts or eroded and re-surfaced discoveries. I have used a build-up of clay and plaster and chalky earth-based materials such as wood to convey this idea of commodity-as-artefact. In trying to create this reading in the work, I felt this brought a feeling of duration, time and decay to the materials I had used. This seemed to create contradictions that pushed against the inherent logic or ideology embedded in the commodity: that they are timeless and new. The mass-produced commodity often appears to hold within it, the ideology that it is immune to deterioration or notions of impermanence.

The use of these more ‘organic’ materials are used to create an abstraction of nature in the proper sense of the word. These formal connotations which are employed to create this substitutive effect are noticeable within an abundance of architectural designs in both public and commercial spaces including cafes, restaurants, large corporate reception desks, day-spa lobbies, foyers and yoga studios.
Within the context of interior design and décor, this is a binary relation between nature (wilderness) and capitalism, a synthesis between plants and the social organising and management of natural resources. A common example of this management of nature can be seen in the way people cut their garden hedges into right angles, sometimes with varying geometric shapes. This is a feature which can be seen in almost any garden whether domestic, institutional or public space.

In the construction of Alpine Breeze, I used a collagic approach to juxtapose flowers and foliage with the packaging of a motorbike protective blanket. By creating a paradoxical link between ecological preservation and environmentally hazardous materials, the work aimed to address the ways in which formal signification (colour, props, atmosphere, typography) is used to create moral associative links. Within advertising, I believe this is a mythological manipulation of existing sign systems used to construct an ethical appearance of a friendly cohesiveness between nature and machines.

Image 4.3 (Right) Low Relief. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2017

Alpine Breeze is the coming together and arrangement of a number of heterogeneous materials and iconography aimed at playing upon the contradictions which lie within the exchanging of signs and forming of visual rhetoric.

This is described by Edward Bernays, as the engineering of consent - an apparatus used to influence public perception through various kinds of visual propaganda. I would argue that

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32 Edward Bernays, The Engineering of Consent refers to the unconscious manipulation of the masses through forms of visual propaganda: “The engineering of Consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest”
this use of naturalistic iconography is very deliberately intended to obscure a public perception of economic exchange. To draw attention away from the machinic assemblage of economic flows and networks which inherently constitute a globalised corporation. In other words, these strategies within consumer culture are, or at least appear to be, a kind of rebirth of semiotics in ghost form. The corresponding activity between, not signs, but the avatar of signs, the ghost of a sign in order to create and harbour a fabrication of ideology and ethical posturing.

II: Maple Spruce (Two birds sing the same nut cracker)

Images 4.4 (left) and Image 4.5 (right): Maple Spruce (Two Birds Sing The Same Nutcracker), aluminium frame, spray paint, acrylic sheeting, two penguin figurines, plastic flower, plastic leaf, clay. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Images by the artist. 2017

Maple Spruce is an exhibition that was presented at LON Gallery in Melbourne in 2017. It is a sculpture comprised of two penguins facing each other through a sheet of clear plastic.

suspended in an aluminium frame. One penguin looks at its own reflection and at the same time sees a literal extension of itself on the other side of the glass bound by a copper pipe.

This free-standing structure was intended to explore the idea of a merging together of twins. I was interested in the idea of a figurine which is both connected and divided, both the object and subject that delivers and simultaneously receives its own gaze. This relationship aims to create a reading of the way in which these two figures become their own spectacle. The copper pipe was used to connect the two penguins in order to convey the idea that they are the same. It is also used to explore the idea of a false sense of distance and space between one commodity and its replicated and mass-produced other. I originally thought of this as an internal split that confuses the reflection or the ghost with its original body.

This separation, this ‘otherness’ is what I would describe as the ethos of consumer culture, and of visual culture in general; the spirit of connectivity and contact, of communication as an obscuring of the fact that the same technicity is what cements division and segregation. This obscuration is engineered as an explicit and relentless suggestion of intimacy. “Being connected to our ‘other’ through the helpfulness of technicity. The penguin used in this artwork is a plastic toy, a depiction of a cartoon. A cartoon is, in essence, a simplification of reality. It is a narrowing down of detail and a reduction of complexities. It removes the traces of reality which allow us to understand the causes and conditions that brought it into being. This is partly because cartoons do not age, nor do they die. They are social constructs used in an attempt to immortalise something.

In this instance, the toy penguin has been stripped of its relational meanings to ornithology and natural history. It no longer connects us to the modes of analysis through which we understand what the word ‘penguin’ actually signifies. The plastic figurine is only an image of a penguin, an abstraction of signs. This is to say, in this particular case the cartoon does not construct ‘meaning’ in the strictest sense of the word.

I am using this cartoon figurine as a central point of discussion here because I think, as a ubiquitous object within culture, it speaks to a visual occurrence which is happening on a global scale: a social desire to conflate what images mean, as a medium, with the realities they were intended to represent. This can be seen in the proliferation of Instagram and Facebook selfies in which people have added filters and graphics to make themselves appear as a cartoon reindeer, fox or Easter bunny.

The toy figurine rids itself of history and memory through its alienated form, and in doing so becomes a ‘de-politicised language’. It removes itself from a wider web of discourse, which Roland Barthes refers to as a language of innocence. This distortion occurs in and of

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linguistic structures that consequently dissolve into a ‘speech without language’ - this is what Derrida refers to as madness.

As a signifier, the cartoon penguin closes itself off from a willingness to be understood: it separates itself from meaning in favour of becoming a spectacle. It may, in this position, signify new topics and subjects however, these new significations stretch and distort what constitutes a penguin and speaks more to social happenings and solicits a ‘feeling’ of entertainment.

Within this work, I have used an aluminium frame in an attempt to convey the idea of a division and parameter that splits the two penguins. In the context of a consumer culture, I think of this as a separation or split that occurs within the making of a self as membership or profile. This division lies within a collective, global and social construction of a self through ‘user experience’. The personalisation of the brand is embossed in the individual as a profile of their own status. This carving out of oneself is compiled through price ranges and ladder systems of classification.

All of these faculties that are built into the language of display and design belong to a regime of formalism. It is a regime because behind it is a politic that generates a personalisation of the individual as profile, as status. I would argue that this is the making of oneself as other, as a representation that belongs to the ebbs and flows of productivity and exchange values. This other, however, is a series of inputs and outputs, a collective other that is both an incorporated mirror and binary other, a ghost replication of the self- one in which we see ourselves and our connectivity to the market.

I think the caricature or cartoon image of a penguin and other comic-like figures are useful in conveying ideas about the way in which the individual has become the images that represent them. That the binary situation of self and other has been conflated into one body. Maple Spruce was an attempt to explore this idea and also an attempt to generate readings of a stand-in spectator built into the work. This is based on the idea that the artwork has its own agency, its own autonomy and that it can view and converse with itself.

Continuing on from this discussion, there are a number of artworks I have made in an attempt to expand upon the idea of a constructed self, a non-self which is made up of a series of interconnectivities and interactivities with a consumer culture. In particular, the work titled National Anthems II (image 4.6) was a studio development which attempted to communicate a similar idea of a constructed self, made by clustering different materials and images together on the floor. By forming these materials into a totemic, vertical shape, this allowed me to animate these objects and give them a figurative quality. Within this work, I have attempted to convey the idea of an abstract or fragmented body made up through a combining of a soccer poster, a found painting, an Egyptian ceramic head, various found objects and a shoe rack turned sideways. I initially started to think of this work as a collective of spectacles

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which string together various events or cultural fads which have left a trace of materials or objects in their wake.

I often think of how a combining of objects like this results in a fragmentation or dislocation of time - small spectacles, events at different times in history conflated into a single form. In their fragmentation, or more accurately, their abstraction, these objects appear to expose a general ambivalence about what they mean. The ‘feeling’ of entertainment which they were once made for has been emptied out from these chosen items. They remain as remnants of past events, functions or trends that are no longer current or relevant.

The small painting, found in a recycled goods shop, has been placed over the face of a ceramic bust portraying an Egyptian Sphinx. By concealing its face with a painting, I felt this had a dual function: It covered the eyes of the ceramic head, obstructing its gaze, suggesting that it cannot see. It also signified the act of concealing or defacement as a means to display an image. In this sense, defacing is more an act of substituting one image with another. By
concealing the eyes of the Sphynx’s head, I started to think about the idea of a head which absorbs the gaze of onlookers without returning it. It could be looked at but could not return the gaze. Or if there was the outward emittance of a gaze, it would be from a painting, not a face. In this sense, I felt that the painting had become a personified object when it was used to replace a part of the body which is usually considered as a means to identify a person.

I started to think about how the painting drew attention to the absence of the face by the very act of concealing it, which in turn, exposes it. This is, in some respects, an examination of how the application of painting, as an object, allows for the visual field to be internalised in a psychological and imaginative sense. Through these explorations of concealment, I have become more interested in how this might be used in other ways to conjure up a mental image of something which is rendered absent. This also started to open up the discussion of internalisation in relation to the human figure. The idea of the body as a shell which absorbs its sensory experience of the world and becomes the world it interprets visually.

Continuing on from this, I started to reflect more on the idea of certain polarities between internal and external spaces, visible/invisible, concealed/exposed objects and how this could communicate the feeling of a ‘psychological space’. This idea of what constitutes a psychological space may not necessarily be exclusive to the use of figurative materials and perhaps could be communicated through the use of architectural objects or animalistic content such as in the above work *Maple Spruce*.

In the following chapter I will attempt to reflect and elaborate upon the idea of the image functioning as a body and how it operates as part of a machine-body. One which exchanges and produces images. I will also attempt to elaborate on how this creates certain power dynamics in our current visual culture. This will encompass certain discussions around the interactivity we have with images.
Chapter 9

Image as Servant: helpfulness and the assertion of power

The increasing number of screens and devices that have entered our lives seems to have increased the growing divide between pictures and images, which is to say that the gap between material and immaterial things has further widened. This appears to have changed the way we value images and their modes of representation: not by their materiality or content but by their multiplication, mobility and speed.

This coming and going of images in the public domain appears to enhance their ephemeral quality and denotes a kind of disposability of visual information. In this sense, the disposability of marketed images is conducive with a “throw away” culture, whereby images lose any association with preciousness in their multiplicity and, although paradoxically, create an increased sense of authenticity in our viewing experience. The commodification of spectatorship that propels the Entertainment industry (particularly digital media entertainment) appears deeply rooted in the spectacle of dislocation: the sensation of images being immaterial or thinking of the internet as a “place” which is indiscernible from an actual place. On a global scale the idea that a virtual place is no higher or lower in value than geographical place is being further cemented as a socio-economic value that has opened up and reconfigured the marketing of brands.

The physical act of touching a screen as a gesture, as a movement between the human body and software crosses the boundaries between the analogue and the digital and cements the idea that there is no discernible difference between flicking a switch and doing so in a virtual space. In light of this, spectatorship now operates as a desire to be engaged in an event and be removed from it at the same time. An experience that is mediated through a device or a screen that provides this sensation.

Spectatorship obscures the fact that images don’t move through us but rather we move through images: as profiles, icons, hash tags, representations, interfaces and online displays. The spectacle of the commodity forges social participation through a relentless optimism in which it is providing, or rather, *delivering* the service of the spectacle – that it delivers the image to *you* and that you do not have to do anything to receive it. It is helping you to receive and absorb it, to consume.

The assertion of helpfulness and generosity is forced upon its recipient - it is in itself a characteristic of ‘exchange power’. The customer is subject to a kind of institutional generosity without choice; this helpfulness renders you as the consumer of that helpfulness.

The commercial appearance of generosity distorts even further, any moral and ethical analysis and discourse that constitutes the result of this helpfulness. It confuses the positions of power by swapping the role of establishment classes with that of the consumer by way of
serving. The establishment uses the role of the servant as its avatar. That those who are served are representative of affluence and those who serve are of poverty. This is an abstraction, a distortion of class distinction that favours the corporate side of the transaction. Or more specifically, helpfulness is the mythologised development of a disembodied hospitality that conceals the absence of any genuine moral constitution within the organisational systems of corporate power.

This servitude is built into, not only the automated machine (automated phone services, self-serving check-out counters and digital screens in lifts) but most importantly, into the image itself – the image is a servant. Because it acts on the individual as its own autonomous body. In many cases, the image as servant is a social apparatus that forms queues, provides menus, pay-pass options and bank withdrawals.

It has become intuitive and in its hospitality, it functions as something innocent. It has the outward appearance of compliance, but this compliance lays down walls and barriers by not allowing an ‘other’ to exist as host or servant. It serves to ensure that the organising systems it provides in banks, supermarkets and in public spaces remain a mobile and digital platform. There is a violence to this operation that is concealed underneath the hospitality of its agenda. It dismantles, by force any alternative to its role.
Whether it be analogue or anything else, it is removed from having any exchange value, however the image-as-servant does not dismantle these alternatives directly – we do. The public carries out a violent dismissal of slower or less efficient organising systems in defence of the digital image. Its compliance, as much as it is oppressive, instils a fear of its replacement; a slower alternative is a threat to socio-economic stability. A collapse of rationality, or even of responsibility.

This comes to mind when I contemplate the idea of not having a smart phone. What would become of me? Bank accounts, emails, contacts, direct debits, gym memberships, passwords, car registration etc. The Capitalist imperative to digitise every aspect of infrastructure and the economy becomes an omnipotent force which renders its rejection as an ‘irresponsible’ act. The image-as-servant is compliant but denies you the option to not have it. To remove oneself from the technological network of connectivity that it provides is deemed grotesque and a violent assault on its service, its governing hospitality and all its constituents.

This is an oppressive schematic that acts as a litmus test in which it reveals itself and its enslavement – it reveals that this helpfulness is precisely what is used to conceal its enslaving apparatus. That the governance of the image-as-servant and its technical apparatus, its algorithms belong inherently to a ruling power of corporate wealth. The image can be seen as a chameleon in this way.

It becomes whatever cultural context it operates within. It ‘blends in’, makes use of itself as a support and nourishment for any given facet of culture or political wing it serves. It changes skin according to its chosen client. In this sense, the general atmosphere of our culture solicits the feeling that Images are no longer fixed. That the multitude of screens through which they
circulate have allowed them to extend and project our immaterial and disembodied presence. In a sense, the image has been used to give human qualities to inanimate things.

The various ways in which we use images to represent us as an emoji, a Facebook profile or desktop wallpaper demonstrates the various ways images are treated as a kind of prosthetic self: an immaterial, even spiritual representation of the human presence. We develop relationships and social connections through the image, as a virtual and digital construct of the self. In this process, images have been separated from pictures in order to evoke the sense that non-living things are alive or become alive.

This idea of the indiscernible space between the living and the non-living, the physical and the spiritual, the digital and the analogue is mentioned by British artist Mark Leckey in his 2011 proposal for a show:

“*We now, are surrounded by all these devices that seem to bring non-living things to life, and for me this produces something akin to what the aboriginal experience of the dreamtime is where no distinction is drawn between things mental and things material, things physical and immaterial, which is similar again to the medieval outlook which saw the physical world enhanced, rather enchanted by the spiritual realm. No distinction drawn between things sacred or things profane: both spheres above and below in coexistence.*“

*Mark Leckey, Proposal for a curated show*

Leckey’s proposal points to a global effort to personify images that activates their economy in both a literal and commercial sense. As images are collectively moving in relation to each other so does their inter-dependent value as constituents of an economy. Images appear, as Leckey points out, to have a life-like quality in their perpetual movement and substitutive value: as objects that stand in for human presence, where the experience of interface becomes a moment where two images rub up against each other, they are given a privileged role of both reporting and representing the human body and in doing so they acquire an almost equal representative value as the physical presence they stand in for.

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36 Mark Leckey, *Proposal for a Show*, Youtube video, 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8QWrLt2eP1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8QWrLt2eP1) UK. Date of publication: 17/12/2010. Date of access: 15/03/2016
Any rejection of the image-as-servant, as technical support, is an immediate hindrance to the self. This is an inter-connectedness in which the individual has been, already integrated into the technicity of a collective self, in which case, to dismiss the image as an inter-connected device, to ‘cut it out’ of the body is gradually becoming near impossible.

In the following chapter, I will outline some of the ways in which this theoretical outline has been implemented into the development of my artworks, particularly installations such as ATLANTIS (image 5.0). To think of the body in these terms, as integrated and interconnected flows of an economy, a market or social construct is a concept which informs many of the sculptures I make. Specifically, it shapes the way in which I try to integrate small assemblages into environments and larger display structures. In the following work, I will discuss these ideas and how they have been used to connect the body, the display and the brand into a singular structure.
Chapter 10

Labour, divisions and hierarchies in display

A.T.L.A.N.T.I.S, is a branded support which brings together many different facets of culture through the arrangement and placement of hand-made and found objects. This large-scale support was made in late 2017, a display unit constructed out of aluminium fittings, acrylic stickers and incorporating a series of sculptural assemblages. The white frame encasing each sculpture has the word ‘Atlantis’ printed on it, making up most of its surface.

The scaffold-like structure has two separate display platforms, one higher than the other to denote that one sculpture is “above” the other, higher in both cultural and political importance. The DIY nature of this construction aims to convey a parody, a critical commentary on the language of display, the formalism in merchandise presentation that peddles ‘connotations’ of value. The overall installation brings together a wide range of cultural signs; they aim to parody the opulence of commodities, which are fetishised, made of highly synthetic and plastic textures. In contrast, the muddy and ad-hoc sculptural works are suggestive of a non-value: a cheap object, made with minimal labour involved.

What *A.T.L.A.N.T.I.S* aims towards is a questioning of economic values cemented in the relationship between the commodity and its platform; that its height and rank on the display unit is a measure of its economic value. The organic and earth-based materiality of the objects aims to symbolise a rejection of the synthetic commodity and a return to a physical and tangible materiality that is earthed. The manipulated clay and cement left exposed and un-treated attempts to give emphasis to the banality of these objects and the lack of artistic skill required to make them- Atlantis, in this sense, seeks to question the way in which the relationship between value and labour is distorted through the manufacturing of the commodity and its display. In other words, a rejection of the distortion of labour generated by the spectacle of the commodity- these sculptures have in their appearance, the total sum of the labour used to create them, meaning, they are meant to ‘look like labour’ in object form.

What once determined the value and economic worth of an object was the time and labour that brought it into the economy - a direct and irreducible measure of value, which in our current times is no longer the case. The untreated and formless lumps of clay and cement, with hand marks embedded, aim to create the *representation of value* generated via alternative modes of social exchange.

Image 5.1 (left) and Image 5.2 (right). Details of *A.T.L.A.N.T.I.S*. Artworks by Michael Georgetti. Images by the artist. 2017
Hanging from the top of this construction is a framed moisturiser advertisement consisting of a blonde female figure (Image 5.1) concealed by another photo of sand caves. These two images placed one on top of the other, form a correlation between the human figure and the earth. In the context of the cosmetic advertisement, facial products, using terms like ‘anti-aging’ or ‘revitalisation ointment’ seem to allude to an alienation or de-humanising of the body or skin. That the relentless stream of new products with names like ‘exfoliation scrub’, pertain to a deferral of death and alienate the physical body from its deteriorating nature. This removal of all significations of death creates a sterility, a kind of dis-embodiment in which the human body is not thought of as our own, it is an abstract reflection of the self. The paradox here, to be without signs of aging or deterioration is, in some respects, to be already dead.

In an attempt to create a political reading of the body’s impermanence and temporal nature, it seemed possible to achieve this by using an image of sand caves, a landscape which bears a resemblance to human skin— an image of the earth to form symbolic reference to the body; that the earth can be used as a signification of its death; the recycling and re-incarnating of the physical body, juxtaposing the contour of the face against the sand formations. This is attempting to denote the ephemerality of aging through formal content and juxtaposition. This is used to disrupt the un-earthed atmosphere of the moisturiser advertisement. The use of earth-based materials, including an image of the sand formations is used to de-mystify and to dispel the atmosphere, the ‘aura’ of fantasy generated by the spectacle of cosmetic commodity in fetishised form.

The highest sculpture on the display has a fragmented, grid-like marking across its form (Image 5.2). The figure is a deconstructed figure of a female body made up of broken ceramic parts. The use of the figure as a symbolic component denotes the subjective space of the body as a space in which the conflicting and eroding structures of linguistic origins, distorted and manipulated through a consumer culture is internalised within the psychological space of the body. A figurative object, in this sense aims to convey of itself, the idea of an interior space in which we inhabit the commodity and in turn, it becomes internalised as consciousness: that the corporate body, made up of a sum of parts, is integrated into the human psyche.

The figurative quality in these works is aimed to convey the idea of subjectivity in which the flows of capitalist production are carried out on the body, on the perceptions and ideas developed in an internalised space. If the body can be designated as a representation of subjectivity, of inward experience for the individual, then perhaps it could be used in these sculptures and constructions to convey the body of the viewer. Not a general body but a more specific one. My initial thoughts were that the artwork could provide its own viewer, a body that stood in for the viewer and in this sense, it aimed to be self-sufficient or not reliant upon a viewing body. If it had its own body then it didn’t need an audience, it could become self-sufficient without a spectator or on-looker. In which case, it could become a spectator of
itself. Perhaps this is more accurately described as a body in isolation rather than a self-sufficient body.

The other aspect of these figurative characteristics is that, in many cases, I have attempted to make them appear machine-like – made up of metal posts or bits of found metal or detritus. In thinking of the body as a machine that serves as part of a bigger machine, the body then may be viewed as an apparatus for producing and consuming – an active and necessary component to the flows of economic production. The body that eats and defecates as a flow of consumption and movement, or rather, the body as a stationary corridor through which the flows of consumption are passed in one end and out the other. In this sense, the body becomes a metaphor for production and the production of production. One aspect of works such as ETIHAD was to preserve a kind of machinic quality to the display structure. A kind of desiring machine, in which the body consumes its surroundings, engulfs all surrounding cultural signs and becomes those signs.

Perhaps it is more accurate to describe a machine as a corpse, the activity and movement of dead things. In this sense, perhaps the making of a body in these works could be described more as a corpse than a body. What is absent in these bodies in any metaphorical or literal sense is its capacity to produce life and this could possibly make them, inauthentic. John Ruskin outlines this point, identifying a fundamental characteristic of the machine in its capacity to have life or produce it: “The machine can make only inauthentic things, dead things; and the dead things communicated their dead-ness to those who used them.”

What Ruskin identifies is a central theme within this research project. That within our globalised visual culture, there appears to be the desire to imbue life into non-living things. This is a similar point that Leckey makes. To integrate oneself into technology is, in many respects, to avoid distinguishing between the living and the dead.

Continuing on from these discussions, I started to think about how I might be able to convey certain readings of this relationship between the machine and the body in my artworks. What materials, forms or imagery could I use to generate readings of a body that has been integrated and absorbed into a globalised world? I started to think of what formal geometry or pattern could symbolise or depict these discussions. A grid, a web or an assortment of marks which, if painted onto the body may somehow convey an idea of fragmentation or a dislocated figure or body.

I searched for literal depictions of figures in everyday or domestic objects and discovered a set of light-weight garden statues which I thought could be used to depict a number of different readings I was hoping to achieve. I started to then deconstruct these statues into abstract resemblances of their original human form (Image 5.3 and 5.4). I would then paint a web-like series of marks around the figure in order to convey the idea of an integrated and fractured human subject as I had done previously in ATLANTIS. The lines and marks were intended to represent a connected and, at the same time, a dislocated connotation of the human form. The broken cement parts were rested on top of each other in an attempt to create a reading of a precarious figure, one which is balancing on itself.

These figures or parts of them were later incorporated into larger display structures such as *Desiring Machines* (Image 3.6) and *Quasi-Bodies* (Image 1.7). The deconstructed statues became an integral part of these supports as representatives of a viewing spectator built into the work.

Using clay and plaster, these sculptural forms had a crumbling and ephemeral quality to their appearance. I wanted to preserve this texture within these objects as I felt it conveyed a sense of impermanence in their materiality and allowed these objects to convey readings of
duration and time in their appearance. In an aesthetic sense, I also wanted these rough and cracked surfaces to provide a textural contrast to the polished support they are resting on.

The role of the body, or connotations of the body within my artwork is used in many different ways. Often it is implemented to create metaphors or narratives in relation to specific body parts: the heart, the face, the gaze. All of these characteristics pertaining to the body have allowed me to create various narratives pertaining to psychology, emotive or romantic symbolism or to convey the feeling that the body has collapsed or been emptied of content.

In many ways, the body is used to materialise the idea that images act as servants. Images today seem to have the qualities of being alive or ‘serving’ imbued upon them in many facets of globalised culture. In the development of these artworks, I wanted to convey the idea of a non-living thing being made to perform the tasks of the living. The figurative connotations in these artworks appear collapsed or deflated and at the same time serve the purpose of being ‘carriers of the image’ – holding and propping up a painting, a print or poster. They are intended to appear as bodies which act as a support for the image. In this way, I wanted the body to appear as though it performs the function of inanimate things, acting as a display or a utility.

As a more general overview on this chapter, I think these areas of discourse are used within my practice to understand a dialogue between a capitalist economy and the human figure. This is the idea that the physical body is fragmented into a series of flows and counter-flows of economic distribution. It has become part of an economy of signs, brands and images. The flow and distribution of such content is used to bring people together through an ideology of consumption.

This is a much more ‘personalised’ economy because it uses a semiology of visual significations to internalise itself, to work on the physical senses. Paradoxically, what appears to be happening on a more ‘actual’ level, is the absence of personalisation, the absence of connectivity which is now substituted for a social engagement built on a supply and demand principle. Bodies connect through an exchange of cultural signs. The constituents that make up the individual, the self, have become available to the market place. The body accumulates capital value through its ability to be represented by an image and more so, how quickly that image is shared and consumed.

Continuing on from this area of discussion, I would now like to draw upon some of the findings that I have gathered through the application of these ideas towards more resolved outcomes in my practice. In the final chapter of this PhD I would like to discuss in more detail how these areas of discourse were carried out through a methodological framework and what findings and discoveries I managed to generate through this process.
Image 5.5 left: *Vultures who Fly With Kites*. sports jacket, acrylic paint, plaster on canvas. Dimensions approximately 120 x 65 cm. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2018

Image 5.6 right: *Colonial Spirit*. aluminium frame, sports jacket, acrylic sheeting, found poster and custom-made vinyl stickers. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2018
Conclusion

This PhD project has been, in many respects, more an attempt to understand the movement and production of brands and signs through a very physical and nuanced approach to making sculpture and installation.

It has also been a process of navigating an expanded art practice through a political reflection and negotiation of these objects that I choose to bring into the studio and, furthermore, to understand why they became important or endowed with a particular significance in some way or another.

I have, through specific methodologies, examined a certain oscillation between high and low values that are embodied within commodities. In this process, I have attempted to unpack and shift a familiar perception of these values and the cultural significations associated with these objects by placing or re-configuring them into a wide range of installations, environments and sculptures.

I have developed a sculptural practice to test how particular political or social values are given to objects and how they can be removed or turned on their head through the manipulation of certain materials in the context of an artwork. What I hoped to achieve through this development was a revealing of the ways in which these values were informed by or had been abstracted from pre-constructed notions of status, affluence or labour.

I felt that the intended outcomes of these artworks were achieved through a rigorous manipulation of materials. For example, welding a base material such as aluminium into a functional object. Through these various processes, these materials became animated and became something completely different to what they originally appeared to be.

These qualities were achieved through the anthropomorphising of materials, in which the artworks off-set a series of cultural and political discussions regarding excess, taste, status and consumption. Many of these discussions, generated within the artworks, pointed to a questioning of the economic and cultural rationale that has propelled these objects into the world.

Painting has also been used to generate a number of discussions through its anthropomorphic and animated form as a sculptural object. Through the figurative or human qualities given to the picture-plane or by bringing a painting into the centre of the space, it started to generate readings of an architectural site, a display or a monument. The personification of painting, in this sense, was activated through its 3-dimneionality. This in turn, opened up a series of discussions and provided some important insights as to how this might provide a useful
context for dislocating or unpacking certain commodities, domestic products or fashion accessories.

Once the painting was tied to or juxtaposed against more current products and commodities (sports jacket, shoes, brand stickers) it started to manifest particular narratives within the various branded objects attached to it. These narratives opened up a way of relating to these objects outside of a normalised and familiar understanding which has been prescribed to them. More specifically, it allowed a way to look more closely at how these objects signify notions of value, affluence and status in general.

The use of juxtaposition has been a central methodology in this investigation. It has allowed me to find visual relationships, patterns, correspondences and contrasts that re-direct the work away from the everyday logic and expectations given to certain brands, products and iconography. For example, placing a sausage on the image of the male body to create readings of hyper-masculinity or placing a small painting over the face of a sphynx head. Or wrapping a wrist watch around a baguette to animate a figurative reading of the object. These have been material relationships, interventions and appropriations that have allowed me to dismantle preconceived expectations of how these objects operate in the world and where they belong according to a socio-economic role they have been placed in.

I noticed that when this placement was decided upon based on a deliberate and conscious effort to create a political or sociological reading due to the cultural relativity of two chosen objects side-by-side, then the outcomes of the works critical capacity became more effective and accessible to the viewer. It also meant the finished piece rubbed up against less de-politicising obstacles such as aesthetics, decorative chatter or what could even appear sometimes as mere visual noise.

The placement of objects within a given assemblage was more successful in cases whereby there was both a formal connection between the objects that could be noticed and at the same time a political reading that could be made. Usually this reading was achieved through an anthropomorphic coding of the objects. For example, the curvy lines on a pair of sports pants next to wavy hair on a wig.

These are as much formal relationships between objects as anything else but I think it is plausible to say that because of the cultural currency of the given objects, they could be read in relation to various psychological constructs: notions of hyper-masculinity, sexual desire, instant gratification, power, control and a whole range of psychological and political discussions. The point here, is that they were not unconsciously and randomly occurring but rather, measurable and correlatively linked to the use of the applied creative methodologies. In which case, the outcomes of these experiments were successful.

When personified attributes allowed a correspondence between two objects or more, then this became the instructive methodology for the placement of each item in the making of the
overall assemblage. I believe this was successfully achieved and refined throughout the
duration of the research project. I think it is noticeable through a series of visual
demonstrations and studio experiments that an expanded art practice may be applied to
provide insight and new knowledge of how we perceive, inhabit and understand the language
and semiotic relations of consumer signs and brands.

Having said that, it also seems contradictory to refer to branding as a kind of semiotic system
in the sense that brands and advertising are the opposite to linguistic sign structures. Brands
mimic the fullness of linguistic sign systems that came before it, however they also empty
these signs of their corresponding meanings.

The free-standing paintings, with designer logos attached, aimed to demonstrate a slippage
between reading and seeing by bringing text into or around the image or attaching it to the
edges of its display. By creating this visual relationship, I aimed to examine certain
differences in the way we recognise and interpret text and image relationships. This was a
study of the visual and experiential differences between the see-able and the say-able within
the sculptural presentation of painting. I felt this was a substantial finding within the research
because it demonstrated an experiential understanding of these cognitive differences which
are difficult to articulate in words. I think that works such as Desiring-Machines and French
Partition demonstrated a capacity to expose our cognitive experience of brand logos in terms
of how we no longer read them in a graphic and linear sense, but rather, they are more
experienced as images, not words.

Regardless of the fact that brands are often made up of words, letters or even sentences, the
peculiar thing is that they are still experienced as singular symbols or a total impression. This
is the fundamental point which I feel this investigation was useful in identifying. That
methods such as re-contextualisation, disruption, appropriation is effective in exploring and
extrapolating upon this perceptual phenomenon. That the analogous qualities of these
readymade objects and their capacity within the chosen methodologies may have provided, a
different ‘perspective’ of these existing philosophical idea.

I believe these methodologies, applied to the given materials are capable of becoming an
alphabetical platform through which these subjects may be communicated in a new way, and
perhaps this platform provides a sensory and experiential taking in of these ideas that may be,
at times, somewhat limited by the literary interpretation of them.

A less quantifiable but equally effective finding of this research was the value and
methodological approach to making art based on intuition. This is both the politic that
governs the work and a process of finding a way of choosing certain forms and visual
relationships based on a ‘feeling’ that something ‘works’.
It is the politic of the work for the very reason that it is not quantifiable; if it were, then it could be organised into an institutional and compartmentalised labour—could possibly become part of the same systematic form of production of which this project aims to critique. In this sense, one of the findings of the research is that the ‘measurability’ or ‘quantifiability’ of any method of production is constituted in a capitalist system of productivity—it belongs to a regime of social organisation and control. Intuition, however, seems to be one of the few methodologies that situates itself outside of this.

Intuition is, nonetheless heavily mythologised in the depiction of artists (particularly in movies of abstract painters depicting the artist as genius, as a mad and tortured subject: Jackson Pollock) Regardless of these depictions, I think it is a necessary methodology, one which has been effective in generating readings that could later be discussed and aligned with broader and more complex ideas.

Intuition, or thinking through practice based on a hunch or an impression as to why some visual relationships work and others not so much, could be described in the context of this research as noticing an ‘uncomfortable’ feeling about the presence of the artwork. That it was unfamiliar in its disposition and had arrived at an arranged form or posture that had not been reached yet. In these instances, this method of working has proven to be effective in guiding the resolve and execution of both smaller scale artworks and large-scale environments.

The selection of commodities based on their typography, graphic and visual display brought about a large number of ongoing inquiries. First, that the psychoanalytical strategies and engineering of propaganda used in consumer culture is possibly able to be ‘de-coded’ through a study of semiotic theory. This I believe to be true, based on the evidence generated through the testing of selected readymade objects and theoretical references discussed within this exegesis.

Furthermore, the deconstruction of display structures and the development of specific artworks which contained brand iconography upon the display itself allowed me to communicate a visual link between semiology and commodity, or rather ‘merchandise as sign’. This provided a way in which hidden subtexts or ideologies within the graphic language of commodities could be perceived through a corporate lens. More specifically, works such as The Glitch, Ladder, Hierophant, were based on their critical feedback, capable of communicating, or more importantly, of expressing these correlative links.

I felt that in order for a particular method to become effective and useful it needed to be applied in unison with other methods. In works such as Lavender or Ladder, I was able to employ a number of different methods in order to identify some of the ‘atmospheric values’ that have been implemented in marketing strategies. In particular, the results of these works and their findings were achieved by combining the use of collage and juxtaposition together.
These artworks in particular, I believe, identified these findings most clearly and were useful in conveying a sense of distortion, skewing and collapse which changed the way these brands or commodities would normally be perceived.

Works such as ETIHAD and Colonial Spirit were examples in which these findings were reflected through the coordination of these objects and their figural characteristics. By applying brands onto the aluminium frames or support structure, it was possible to emphasise the idea of a line, a boundary or division which metaphorically speaks of brands as forms of segregation and separation within structures of class and status. In this sense, I feel I was able to achieve a feeling of the brand becoming the display itself, rather than being situated on top of the display. The language of display, in this sense, was the brand/image. This was a finding in the research that opened up a new way of incorporating images into the materials in the construction of the work.

The overall aims of the research project brought about a number of key findings. In particular, the use of intuition as a means to expose and reveal a subtext or concealed ideology within a commodity or brand. In addition to this, another central finding was the capacity for a formalist language to be used in order to discover and create readings of economic and political value within the language of display.

The subject of absurdity as a creative methodology revealed a capacity to imbue within the readymade object a series of critical readings of establishment and capitalist structures of order, placement and sequence. Absurdity, by disrupting the social logic of the readymade allowed for a way to read these objects as appearing to be oppositional or structures of ‘civil disobedience’ and antagonistic. I think absurdity allowed for these objects to develop ‘behavioural’ characteristics that personified them and consequently made them political. I think the most revealing and central finding within the research is in noticing a sculpture or installation’s capacity to take on human qualities. By appearing human or even having figurative characteristics (posture, attitude, wearing clothes etc.) allows these installations and sculptures to communicate other theoretical or socio-economic discussions in an experiential way, in a way that is accessible and able to be interpreted on an emotive level.

I think the anthropomorphic capacity of these constructions allowed for the audience to relate to them as empathetic bodies or constructions of self that could be understood on a more personal level, which in turn permitted the concepts and theoretical aims of the work to be present and read more clearly.

This PhD has been an attempt to demonstrate how the animation and activation of branded commodities, found objects and painting exposes a hidden dialogue and discourse belonging to these objects, which can be understood in more depth through an expanded sculptural practice. The use of these creative methods have been effective and insightful in testing and unpacking these discussions within a contemporary art context. The artworks produced within this investigation have generated a number of new and experiential ways of engaging
with these discussions and concepts, which I believe has allowed me to generate insight and knowledge within the context of an expanded art practice. I hope these discussions, discoveries and the knowledge gathered from these explorations will be of use and relevance to other artists and practitioners within surrounding areas of research in the future.
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*Maple Spruce (Two birds sing the same Nutcracker)* aluminium frame, spray paint, acrylic sheeting, two penguin figurines, plastic flower, plastic leaf, clay. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2017

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*The Helpful servant.* Wooden platform, cartridge paper photocopy, coffee table frame, gold leaf, ink drawing in wooden frame, Chanel perfume bottle, plastic toy crocodile, sock, spray paint. Dimensions variable. Artwork by Michael Georgetti. Image by the artist. 2015

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