

# **Growth, Endlessness, Blocks**

**by**

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Thesis Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in the

School for the Contemporary Arts  
Faculty of Communications, Art and Technology

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## **Abstract**

*Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* is a sculptural installation comprised of a series of wood structures of various scales. Large sections of drywall function as extensions of the gallery walls. Each structure balances a number of different physical characteristics that are tied to the act of making. Balance and presence combine in a disconcerting way giving the viewer a sense of uneasiness and a moment finely tuned by the artist. The artist seeks to embody the role of the factory fabricator as a means of exhausting the limits of the materials used and of emulating the role of the worker.

**Keywords:** Sculpture; Production; Work, Art; Thesis

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this to both my mother and grandmother, Dona and Fujiko, without whom, attending this program and making this work would not have been possible. I would also like to dedicate this to the memory of David, who taught me to be both disordered and particular.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the hard work, support and encouragement from my supervisors Elspeth Pratt and Sabine Bitter. I would also like to thank my partner Sydney for her loving support and last minute editing—thank you for everything.

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## **Author's Note**

The author of this Project would like to reassure the reader that the Project Statement is substantially shorter in length than the accompanying appendix. The Master of Fine Arts degree undertaken at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, emphasizes artistic creation, which the Statement serves to describe, and the accompanying materials document. The appendix, undertaken as academic research during the tenure of this degree, serves to present the critical thought undergone prior to, and during, the creation of the artwork.



Figure 1 *Knife Block, Studio detail, 2014*

# Thesis Defence Statement

## Growth, Endlessness, Blocks

In Vancouver, building materials are ubiquitous and poor quality. Cheap pine 2x4's make their way via donation to the Simon Fraser School for the Contemporary Arts studio space at regular intervals. These materials are usually donated from other arts institutions, where walls and furniture often go up and come down with regularity. Having served their original purpose, most of this material is not suitable for building. This history is marked in the material by screw holes, warping, dents, and dirt. These donated materials make up the majority of my MFA graduate thesis project. Reuse of materials is a common part of my practice and is reflective of how it is often necessary to work: thriftily and ephemerally. Using this kind of material allows my practice to be mobile and forces me to be flexible. There is no standard or ideal condition within which to work. The luxury of making art as a grad student is a fleeting way of establishing a sustainable practice.

My MFA graduate thesis project focuses on the act of building. Construction often begins with the gutting and tearing down of something old or broken, giving it a feeling of endlessness. Something old begets something new. *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* is made up of a series of sculptures that are to be considered individually and as a whole. I began making this series of structures thinking about three things: building, material, and the DIY ethos. My interest was not in connecting these three things but in letting them shape my way of working: what material and aesthetic choices I would make, as well as the way I was going to make things. Primarily made of wood, drywall, and glue, these sculptures when seen together make up a kind of ghostly floor plan. Some pieces are more like furniture and some like framing. The frame for a wall begins with a cut list—a list of materials and the lengths they need to be cut. These works begin in the studio with the simple intention of breaking this process down.

When preparing to make a work, materials are processed in a way that clumsily resembles factory production. In a sawmill, logs are manufactured into dimensional lumber like the 2x4. This process involves many steps before something square and straight exits the mill. These materials I use resemble the off cuts that already pepper the free materials bin in the SCA studio. An action like cutting becomes the purpose and the end goal. A 2x4 is planed again and again, making smaller and smaller parts, until the materials become brittle. The imperative to conserve materials motivates these actions. This is evident in the economy of how the pieces are made, what they are made out of, and how they will eventually be taken apart. In my work these materials respond to a need for thriftiness and conditions of scarcity. Components are conceived of in 'blocks' and are either stacked or held together ephemerally so that during installation parts may be shifted and restacked as needed. My sculptures are contingent and temporary, rather than practical or permanent. These materials now have their own set of rules for how to be handled and what they can be coerced into. A 4ft by 8ft frame is made from long thin poles. The wood is barely able to support itself and some poles have cracked at the knots. Strain becomes part of how the work exists and how it is built.

Like much of the building that we see around us, my sculptures are sparse and temporary. They are shadows of something utilitarian. Think of the struts for signage or the cladding around a house in construction, or in some cases the house itself. I see buildings reduced to their frames as structures in a state of transition and potential. They are a jumping off point to reimagine what a space could be. The structures I make are also like suggestions or temporary solutions to some bigger problem or moment, easily broken apart and quickly remade.

The idea of the quick fix interests me, like fixing a hole in the wall with tissue paper and glue. This ethos is something I began using in past works and something I will continue to explore. The quick fix is something that I associate with DIY. DIY has its roots in craft and design, as well as more general anti-establishment movements. DIY is not necessarily amateur. It suggests working within your means or working with what you have on hand, in less than ideal conditions. The quick fix is most popular as the 'hack' meme. To hack something is to find out what is underneath something that makes it tick. Lists like "25 unexpectedly genius household hacks" are easy to find on the inter-

net. As they circulate, they move up in the internet hierarchy, infiltrating major news sites and taking on new forms of legitimacy. These lists are not simply entertainment. They are reflective of the ways some people have to or choose to live. Many of these quick fix suggestions have to do with substitution—usually of something more expensive with something cheap.

There is also a proliferation of DIY how-to guides on the Internet, for example, [lifehacker.com](http://lifehacker.com), [instructables.com](http://instructables.com) or [ikeahackers.net](http://ikeahackers.net). Many of these projects are fun and silly with little concern for function, while some are utilitarian with little concern for form. They are open source, meaning open to adaptation and free for anyone to use. Often they are ways for someone to do something on the cheap or not quite up to code. Art/design collectives like Recession Design, who have put out a series of DIY pamphlets for high-design/low cost household objects, make it clear that the impulse to design our way out of the recession can be ironic but also instructive. The signifiers for a DIY design aesthetic are clearly marked in these designs. This kind of furniture is often made of readily available industrial materials like plywood and 2x4's. Materials like these mark a modernist legacy and become tropes used in creative spaces. They appear often, in everything from alternative children's spaces to galleries, as well as being co-opted as display furniture in clothing stores.

DIY as a counter-movement to capitalism and consumer culture has failed: it has been swallowed by capitalism and neoliberalism. To understand this in a different way we can look to Steyerl's essay/thought experiment *Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life*, which asks us to consider the ways that art is occupying our lives. Her question here is about the invisibility of this type of occupation. She asks the doubtful reader:

Have you been beautified, improved, upgraded or attempted to do this to anyone/thing else? Has your rent doubled because a few kids with brushes were relocated into that dilapidated building next door? Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone? (Steyerl)

This expanded idea of occupation is about occupation as a physical/spatial notion as well as the idea that work has become occupation. In an article about contempo-

rary design, Foster argues that our lives are so completely occupied by design as to leave us smothered by it. He writes in reference to Adolf Loos' 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime* "such is the malaise of "the poor little rich man": rather than a man of qualities, he is a man without them ..., for what he lacks, in his very completion, is difference or distinction"(16). Foster is referring to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or the "total work" of arts and crafts. This movement designed everything from "architecture to ashtrays"(13). Loos' essay, which associates all ornament with crime, includes the allegorical tale of *The Poor Little Rich Man* whose life has been so occupied by design as to arrest any further development of his person. Foster acknowledges that total design is not a new idea—which goes back to the Bauhaus in the 1920's. He argues that, since then, there have been many factors that have contributed to the inflation of design: media taking a central role in the economy, the tailoring of products to reflect back on the consumer as a mini-me, and the ubiquitousness of branding and brand equity. He writes:

Contemporary design is part of a greater revenge of capitalism on postmodernism a recouping of its crossings of arts and disciplines, a routinization of its transgressions... perhaps it is time to recapture a sense of the political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression, a sense of the historical dialectic of disciplinarity and its contestation—to attempt again to "provide culture with running-room". (Foster 25)

Running-room is a notion he derives from Karl Kraus, who, writing around the same time as Loos, emphasizes the need for distinction between art and the utilitarian object. Foster goes on to say that this confusion between the two things risks a regressive indistinction of things: there is a failure to see that objective limits are necessary in order to create "a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture...The stake is one of "distinctions" and "running-room," of proposed differences and provisional spaces"(17). Again we can think about Steyerl's notion that art occupies life as well as her distinction of art as an occupation. At the beginning of her essay she writes: " Lets start with a simple proposition: what used to be work has increasingly been turned into occupation." Steyerl's definition of occupation is important to note:

An occupation is not hinged on any result; it has no necessary conclusion. As such, it knows no traditional alienation, nor any corresponding idea of subjectivity... It is not centered on a producer/worker, but includes consumers, reproducers, even destroyers, time-wasters, and bystanders—in essence, anybody seeking distraction or engagement.”

Steyerl's ideas on what exactly it means to be an occupier speak not only to Foster's idea of the designed subject, but also to my ideas on DIY. DIY is a place where we are asked not only to believe in design, but to enact it as producer. We are designed subjects, engaged in the very processes which produce us as such. In Loos' essay, the poor little rich man is totally designed by a master architect. In Steyerl's contemporary articulation, we are the ones occupying ourselves. Grois writes in *The Obligation to Self-Design*, that

Loos' essay is, famously, not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the mood of the entire artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century, which sought a synthesis of art and life. This synthesis was supposed to be achieved by removing the things that looked too arty both from art and from life. (Groiš 27-8)

Modern versions of DIY put the consumer in a now familiar place of a contributor or producer. Content is created by us and is constantly updated and refreshed in new, ever-expanding series of links and hyper links. Steyerl notes that this autonomy is suspect. This is a bastardization of artistic autonomy, where the artist refused to specialize like many of the other professions. She writes:

More recent advances in neoliberal modes of production in many occupational fields started to reverse the division of labor. The artist-as-dilettante and biopolitical designer was overtaken by the clerk-as-innovator, the technician-as-entrepreneur, the laborer-as-engineer, the manager-as-genius, and (worst of all) the administrator-as-revolutionary. (Steyerl)

DIY has taken this flag up with abandon and we are given the agency to make anything and everything we want. Agency itself becomes a product to be consumed. Running-room is a provisional space, and it is important to remember that. I make work

that presses up against various other disciplines without trying to occupy them. This is a way to make space for these sculptures to exist as distinct. They do however exist contingently and in relation to these other things. They are made within this sphere of total design and a life occupied by art.

The forms in my work can be seen as a hangover from modernism, a worn version of itself that may look better in the dim light of the evening. Verwoert defines modernism as something generally considered to be the straight way, but might be better understood as the crooked way. For him, modernism is about the desire for conflicting things like “truth *and* intensity” or “materialism *and* spirituality” (Verwoert 217). On one hand, we want to end the silence of the object and “render the world readable historically, socially, [and] structurally” (Verwoert 225). On the other, we want the need for all interpretation to disappear, “because life in this new world would, in fact, in its very material presence, be as good and true as any art could ever be” (Verwoert 225). Verwoert's proposal is to accept this tension as fact and embrace it as essential to modernism. He writes:

We might come to appreciate precisely the crookedness of many modernist works that—involuntarily or deliberately – embody that contradictory duality of being silent and talkative, mute in their thingness and telling in their historicity, beautifully dumb and intelligent at the very same time. (Verwoert 226)

I am attracted to Verwoert's idea of crookedness as an approach to making art. This is why I would characterize my forms as a modernist hangover rather than an inheritance. DIY culture is a place where this clash is happening in a compelling way. Projects are constructed in a way that forefronts material, but they are also very much embedded in culture. The set of instructions, pictures, and comments are all part of how we access these projects.

In my research paper, I look at the manifestation of two types of DIY in the mixed-use space of Tiny Creatures and the art-and-life work of Andrea Zittel. In Tiny Creatures I identify an urgency born through both cultural and economic need. Tiny Creatures thrived on an anti-establishment ethos that was simultaneously its downfall. When Tiny Creatures became established and when the art dealers and money entered

the scene, things fell apart. Janet Kim who started Tiny Creatures in Echo Park, a poor neighbourhood of LA, was part of a tight knit group of friends, none of whom were part of the MFA heavy art scene at the time. Kim provided a venue for artists that would never have thought of showing their work. This setting allowed them to be unprofessional in relation to the highly professionalized LA art scene. They hung pictures with rope and bean cans out of necessity—a variation on the ‘quick fix’.

Zittel’s work takes on the total design of her own life. She establishes and builds her own home as an art practice/enterprise. *A-Z West* where she lives and works, is on an isolated parcel of land near the Joshua Tree National Park. Much of the language that is used around the work is deliberately corporate. Often this makes her work seem like the precursor to so many of the DIY guides to which I referred earlier. Her website talks about “designs for living” which could easily be changed to ‘life hacks’ (Zittel). Her works, *A-Z Wagon Stations*, when on site at *A-Z West*, are meant to be lived with/in and used, often by neighbours or visitors to the site. When they are off site at a gallery or museum, function becomes relegated to signifier. Function in Zittel’s work is pragmatic and thought out. Unlike Tiny Creatures there is no room for chance or improvisation.

A central theme running throughout my graduate work is building and un-building. Making the work is a process of stripping down or re-purposing and re-imagining. In my MFA graduate thesis project, made over the course of many months, I was able to take this process more literally. Framing that used to be walls in the Audain Gallery become part of a series of shelves or braces balancing a piece of drywall that was once part of a sound studio in the MFA studio spaces. As work is moved from my studio space to the Audain Gallery and back again, leftover material and material I will no longer be able to store will go back to the Simon Fraser School for the Contemporary Arts studio to continue to be used by students and faculty. It is here where the aesthetics of scarcity come into play. These materials are not used to create lasting structures, but to be reused again and again. Temporary walls come up and down. DIY furniture projects are abandoned and sit incomplete.

These works are not functional like DIY, nor do they forefront the materials they are made from. The histories of the materials are always being renegotiated within each

work. They are not walls or floor joists. In a way, I am adopting Rosalind Krauss' description of sculpture in the expanded field: not as a way of describing sculpture, but as a way of making sculpture. In order to make a distinction of what art is in a postmodernist expanded practice, Krauss reclaims the practice of describing sculpture as what it is not: landscape not-landscape, architecture not-architecture and somewhere in between sculpture and not-sculpture. Growth, Endlessness, Blocks presses against Foster's idea of running-room, creating for itself its own space and place in which to exist. Growth projects into the future. It is important to see beyond it to its end and potential for re-growth. Endlessness is not a proposition for a capitalist unbounded growth, but for something with its own end built into it. For me, growth is not a suggestion of stability, rather, it is a process with both endings and beginnings.

The structures I work with are ripe with contradiction. Materials are made weak and brittle through cross cuts and under-building. At the same time, attempts have been made to reinvigorate this material. Sometimes this can happen quite literally with patching and paint. At other times, this same attempt makes the wounds more evident. The material is unstable and demands careful manoeuvring. It is worn down material clumsily staged, haphazardly leaning on air. It is crumbling and straining before our very eyes.

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## Documentation of Works



Figure 2 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 1) 2014.

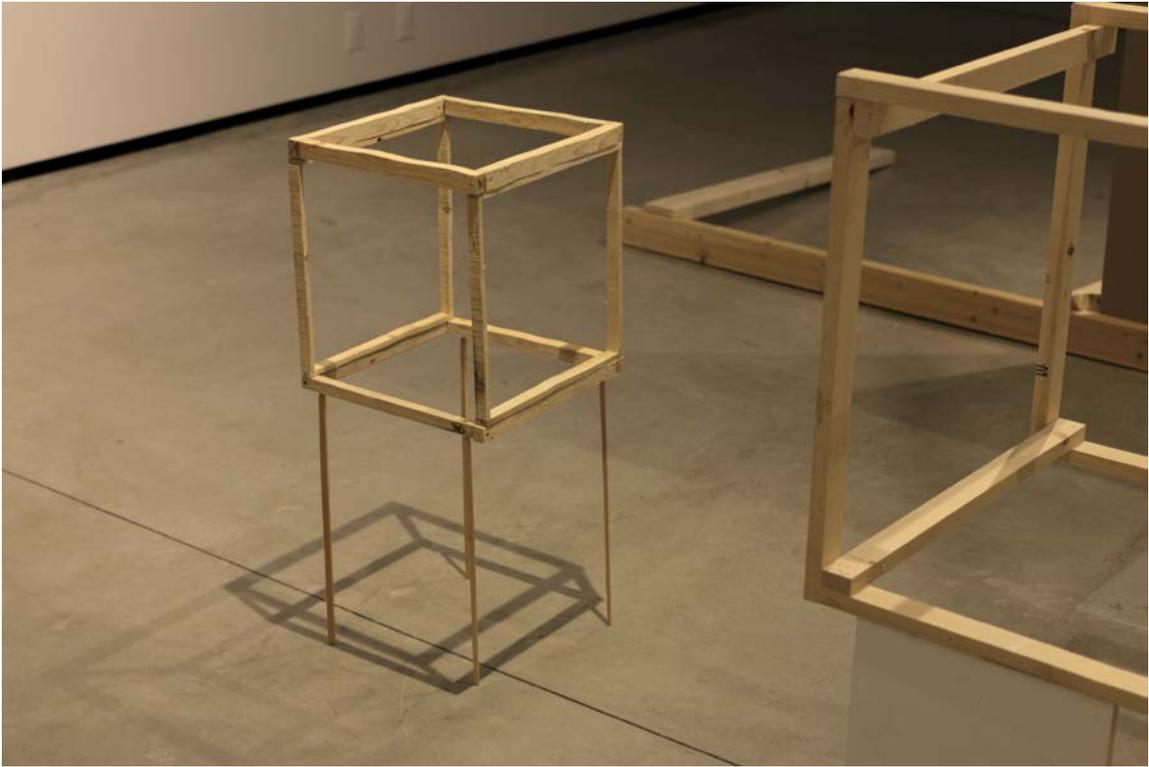


Figure 3 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 2) 2014.



Figure 4 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 3) 2014.



Figure 5 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation detail) 2014.



Figure 6 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation detail) 2014.



Figure 7 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation detail) 2014.

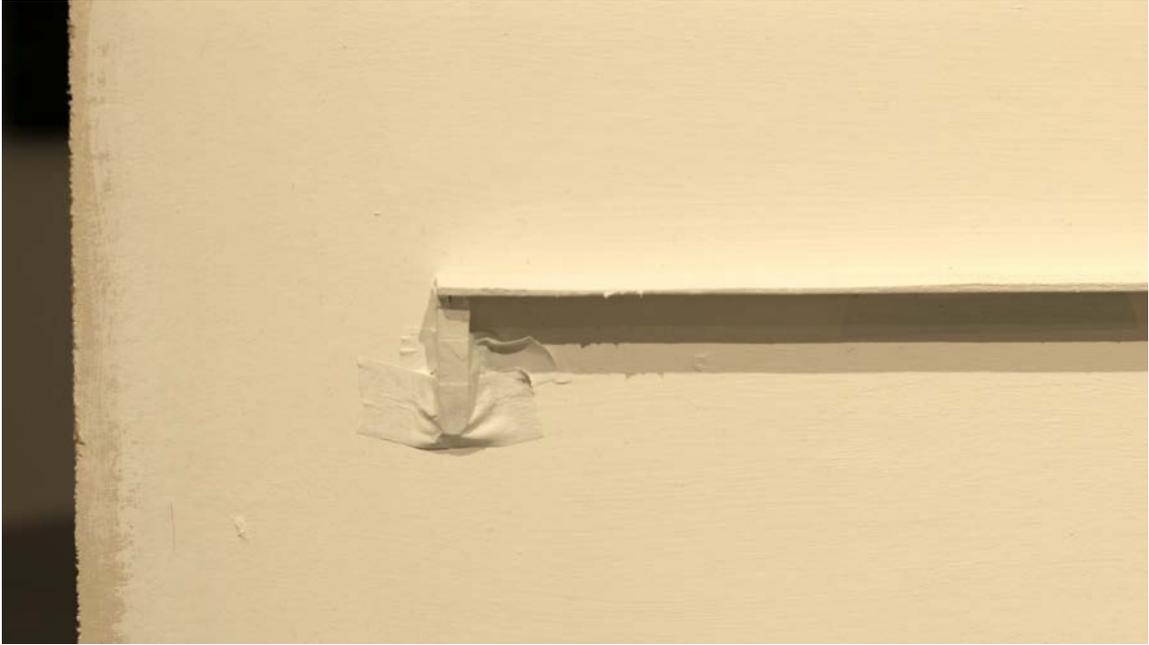


Figure 8 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation detail) 2014.



Figure 9 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 4) 2014.



Figure 10 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 5) 2014.

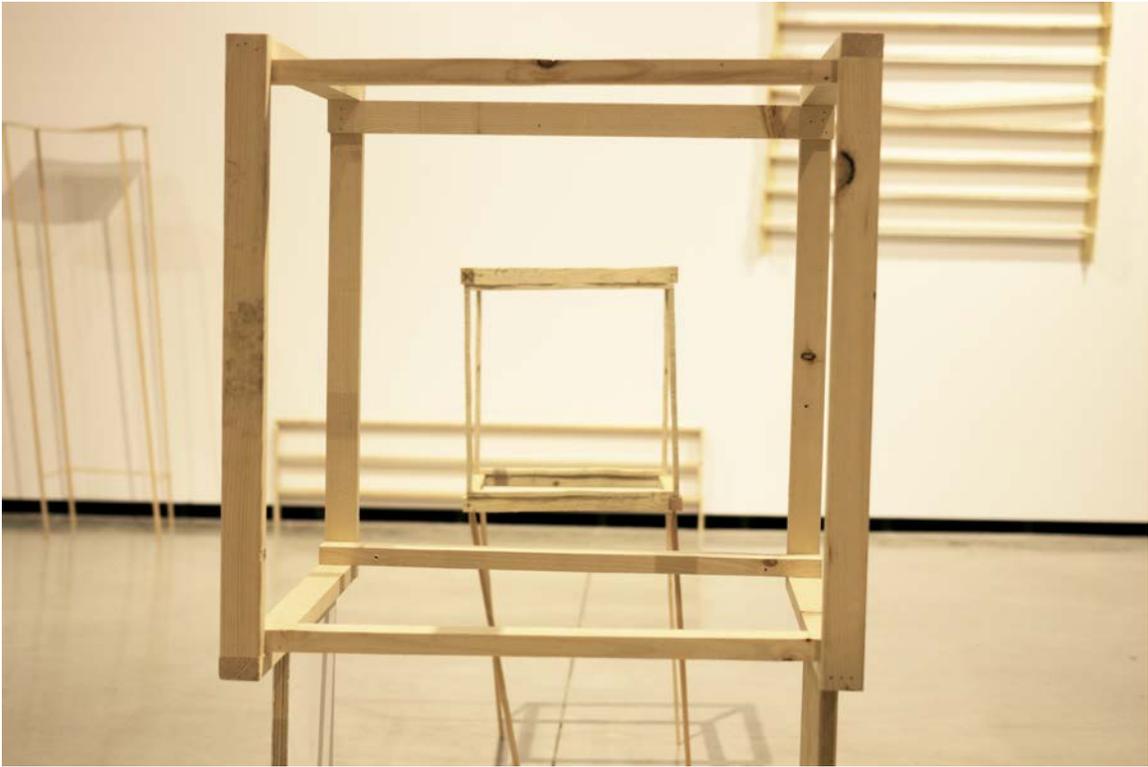


Figure 11 *Growth, Endlessness, Blocks* (Installation view 6) 2014.

## Appendix A

### Research Paper: On the brink of failure

*“Ah!” he groaned, ‘To think that all this isn’t just a bad dream!*

*To think that I’m about to rejoin the base and servile riff-raff of the age!”*

*Joris-Karl Huysmans translated by Robert Baldick*

If it works, destroy it: do it again, do it differently. This phrase functions as a manifesto for a DIY art practice. There are many variations on the DIY or do-it-yourself aesthetic. Within art, this aesthetic has its roots in collage, bricolage and assemblage. In contemporary art practices DIY is often the result of a get-it-done ethos that carries with it hints of nostalgia and fantasy. There are echoes of a lone figure, eschewing consumer society. For example, in *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)*, a work by Simon Starling, the artist finds and takes apart a shed on the edge of a river and re-builds it as a boat. He then uses that boat to ferry the unused pieces of shed several miles down the river to a different city. The boat and cargo then get rebuilt as a shed/artwork in the gallery.

DIY is a place where things are allowed to get torn apart and rebuilt; no good idea is sacred and anything can be made a lot worse as long as it tries to get the job done. I am interested in looking at DIY in relationship to the artistic practice of Andrea Zittel as well as the now defunct Tiny Creatures space run by Janet Kim. Zittel’s current project, *A-Z West*, and Kim’s Tiny Creatures are examples of ways in which a DIY ethos can be used to create space for oneself in a claustrophobic world. Kim created such a space for herself and her peers in the Los Angeles art scene, despite the scene’s apparent calcification, and Kim’s unstable finances. Zittel, after making it big in the art world, began her project *A-Z West*: arguably an escape to or retreat from having arrived in the art world.

## 1. Choosing one thing over the other/Having it both ways

Zittel's connection to DIY is most visible in her positioning of herself and her projects as inseparable. In her artworks, individually, and outside of the context of *A-Z West*, the thread of DIY gets caught up in a variety of other endeavors and is lost. Zittel's (or the *A-Z Administrative Service's (A-Z)*) expansive project, *A-Z West*, is located in Joshua Tree, CA. *A-Z West* is where she both lives and works. She has crafted a space for herself to negotiate (on her own terms) the tensions between the realms of her life, her art, and various other projects. Creating *A-Z West* is simultaneously a way for Zittel to envision herself living a self-sustaining and self-reliant life<sup>1</sup>, as well as an attempt to regulate her interactions and reliance on the art world and the gallery systems (15). Zittel quickly achieved a number of successes throughout the 90s. She was part of a number of solo and group exhibitions; including such major contemporary art exhibitions as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and the Skulptur Projekte Münster. In 2000, she made real a dream to leave the city and move into the California desert. The idea that she is trying to escape, and that her efforts are in part fantasy, is important. DIY functions as a tool, used to buttress the contemporary fantasy of “self-reliance”. In this way, it was a driving force in Zittel's *A-Z* project. Zittel states that her original goal was to be self-reliant: physically and mentally independent from both consumer culture and the art world (138). She also often repeats the idea that she could “move further out into the desert,” something that the curator of her upcoming show, Richard Julin, repeatedly references (Zittel 15). However, Zittel goes on to acknowledge that she supports herself entirely through the sale of art, and that she “feels pretty good about the support” (138). It is hard not to be cynical about Zittel's practice at this point and be critical of its seemingly middle class and perhaps new age pretences. With Julin, she is carefully optimistic. It is hard to know how much posturing is involved, given the knowledge that her words will be published.

<sup>1</sup>In a way she is performing the role of an outsider artist living on the edge of society. We know that she is not actually this because she is still very much entrenched in the contemporary art world/market. She co-founded and plays a key role in the visibility of *High Desert Test Sites*, which is an “alternative space” for both emerging and established artists. The local artists showcased in this event provide a contrast to and exemplify an outside to Zittel's work, and in some ways highlight bourgeois nature of her version of DIY.

The language used to describe this project is very formal. Zittel often writes as a “we,” though *A-Z* and *A-Z West* are her projects alone (Zittel 137). In an early text on her work, Weil writes that *A-Z* “started as a provider of hand-tailored models of ‘life management’ to individuals”(Coles 117). More recently, however, there seems to be a turn toward collaboration; many works are taken, redesigned, and worked on by other people. *A-Z*’s scale ensures that it is often home to many people. In earlier incarnations of this project Zittel used language like “life-management” to describe her work. This has since become “designs for living,” while remaining little experiments or suggestions for how to live (Zittel web). Her works remain instructional as well as retaining the cloying and seductive element of design. Avoiding a prescriptive tone proves impossible, and despite Zittel’s emphasis on self-reliance, the viewer/participants remain managed. Zittel’s position as the art/business entity *A-Z* places her as always in control, playing the role of the hip bureaucrat. It is hard to separate the *A-Z* brand from Zittel, herself, but she has begun to use it less and less as a logo on her works, letterhead etc. *A-Z* the brand is what allows her to live in *A-Z West* the place/fantasy, while simultaneously tying her to this project.

## **2. Retreat/Failure/Trying to find yourself in things**

In an article about contemporary design Hal Foster argues that our lives are so completely occupied by design as to leave us smothered by it. He writes “[s]uch is the malaise of “the poor little rich man”: rather than a man of qualities, he is a man without them..., for what he lacks, in his very completion, is difference or distinction”(16). Foster is referring to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or the “total work” of arts and crafts. This movement designed everything from “architecture to ashtrays”(13). For Grois, “Loos’ essay is, famously, not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the mood of the entire artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century, which sought a synthesis of art and life. This synthesis was supposed to be achieved by removing the things that looked to arty both from art and from life”(27-8). This goal was never achieved, but is one that persists. For Foster, part of this project was taken on by design. The contemporary subject is a designed subject.

Foster writes:

“In a typically pithy statement of 1912 Kraus would call this lack of distinction, which precludes “all future living and striving,” a lack of “running-room”: Aldof Loos and I – he literally and I linguistically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room [Spielraum]. The others, the positive ones [i.e., those who fail to make this distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.”(16)

What happens when we compare Zittel to the poor little rich man? Zittel, unlike the rich man, has control. She designs her own situation. Does this make her free? When Zittel talks about the uncertainty of using new materials—letting things fail and beginning again with the endless possibility of each parcel of land she owns—it is clear that she is more free than most. She is most precarious when she approaches the bureaucracy she abhors and mimics. In Roger Caillois article, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, he conjures up a disturbing image of the schizophrenic, closest to and often confused with the psychasthenic. Caillois writes, “He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is “the convulsive possession” (30). Caillois is writing about a man lost in his surroundings, consumed by them. He suggests that we are tempted by the space that surrounds us. This is why we mimic. Capitalism, consumer culture, and design fill space. Zittel mimics this space and “is similar, not similar to something but just similar”(30).

In Boris Grois' article *The Obligation to Self-Design* he writes, “Where religion once was, design has emerged. The modern subject now has a new obligation to self-design, an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject”(25). Photographs on Zittel's website read like forward thinking interior design catalogues, targeted toward ex hippies and granola hipsters. A-Z's blog roll is full of casual photos of studio assistants at work, having a good time. Zittel's ethical presentation is on display here. We are asked to suspend our disbelief and participate in this fantasy. The workers are always happy; creativity and positivity abounds. Grois writes:

“Without this claim that design manifests the truth of things, it would be impossible to understand many of the discussions of among designers, artists, and art theorists over the course of the twentieth century. Such artist and designers as Donald Judd or architects such as Herzog & de Meuron, to name only a few, do not argue aesthetically when they want to

justify their artistic practices but rather ethically, and in doing so they appeal to the truth of things as such.(27)

Zittel asks us to look at her simple objects and her simple life and believe in them as truths. A-Z the project runs the risk of recreating a situation in which there is no more room for striving. The moments when this project is still 'alive' are when life in all its urgency comes to the foreground, for example, when Zittel talks about problems with getting water or working in the heat of the desert. It is in the mundane details of running this project that a DIY ethos of 'living and striving' become apparent. These are elements that keep her project distinct, in Foster's sense, from our over-designed, ad-saturated, and branded world.

This uncertain territory where art enters life and borrows its forms is dangerous. Zittel has borrowed her forms from bureaucracy and the corporate world, but runs the risk of becoming the very thing she is trying to be critical of. This is not a novel gesture. The artist as corporation is not new. Zittel's motivations have less to do with conceptual art, and more about having to give herself power as a woman in the art world (137). Zittel is both an "I" as artist and the "we" as corporation. Zittel is in danger here of becoming too close to her brand. The two become more and more indistinct as time goes on. Foster warns us of the risk of loose boundaries where subject and object co-mingle and where "use-value and art-value" are confused (17). Zittel the product is no longer thought of as an object to be produced so much as a datum to be manipulated—that is, "to be designed and redesigned, consumed and reconsumed."(21) Foster goes on to say:

[This confusion risks a] regressive indistinction of things: they fail to see that objectivity limits are necessary for "the running-room" that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture. [...] Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural "essence" of art, or an absolute "autonomy" of culture; the stake is one of "distinctions" and "running-room," of proposed differences and provisional spaces. (Foster 17)

This idea of distinction is important when considering Zittel's move to the Joshua Tree desert. Being able to do-it-yourself is not just a reference to a particular ethos, but an essential part of survival. Joshua Tree is isolated and difficult terrain. Both Zittel's skills and the skills of the people she works with are often put to the test (Zittel 82). Living and

working in the desert is a reality that Zittel has had to deal with from the start, and one outside of her control.

### 3. Being a Tiny Creature

There are many current DIY movements that come out the intersections between music and art. This intersection creates a DIY aesthetic that is an iteration of Chris Kraus's book *Where Art Belongs* begins with a recent example of the art/music DIY ethos. It chronicles Janet Kim's Tiny Creatures space, which she began in 2006 in Echo Park. This space (Kim's apartment) began as a record label and only later became a gallery. Echo Park, an area near downtown Los Angeles, was at the time in the midst of a process of gentrification. However, the area was still largely industrial and unoccupied. By the time Tiny Creatures closed its doors in 2009 the whole neighbourhood had changed. It would be hard to deny that Tiny Creatures was not a part of that gentrification. Kraus writes “[...]the *Los Angeles Times* would lament its closing. Rock stars would stand outside on the sidewalk[...].”(19). Kraus's story flips back and forth, sometimes romanticizing and producing a mythology of the space, and sometimes using a more critical lens. The argument could be made that the emergence and collapse of this space was part of an attempt to make space for Kim and her peers where it was sorely needed, mirroring Foster's concept of “running-room”.

Part of the danger in exploring Tiny Creatures as an example a DIY ethos is that it was so short lived and part of a very recent history. All interpretations are up for grabs. As evidenced in Kraus's interviews, even among insiders there is little consensus as to motivations and objectives for Tiny Creatures (20). From the outside, there is a lot of conjecture around what exactly occurred in the space and what that means in a larger context. Kraus is an example of this, taking up the subject of Tiny Creatures for her book, *Where Art Belongs*. It is also important to note that Kim's Tiny Creatures was not an art project (though Kim does write various manifestos for Tiny Creatures (34,41)). Whatever art Kim makes and may have made, none of it falls within the realm of relational art or social practice. The Tiny Creatures brand, unlike Zittel's, had a lot to do with exclusivity and the notion of ‘cool’. However, Kim would never admit to having any conscious approach to branding in the way Zittel does. For Kim, as stated in her final manifesto, “Tiny creatures is an alternative to an overly commodified world[...].”(41).

#### 4. Where does art end and “I” begin?

The idea of a patch is a good way to think about DIY. The patch is flexible, malleable; it relies on other things for it to be recognized. When we need a patch, it is an amorphous thing that floats in our minds. In practice it could be anything, but we probably need it right now, and we will probably need a new one soon. Tiny Creatures was a multipurpose space that was used as everything from music school to art gallery. In a sense it served as a temporary patch that managed to bring together differing communities and people. In a way we can think of the patch as giving things their distinction. A patch makes you aware of the thing it is patching and that something is broken. The art being made and shown at Tiny Creatures was the antithesis to LA's MFA heavy, highly professionalized art scene. Kim, however, was not a part of the art scene, nor from an art background. There seem to be a number of different factors behind the decision to turn what could have remained a jam space/record label into a gallery and loose community space. Kim wanted to make a space for her friends to be able to show their artwork. However, nepotism was rampant and Kim and her friends impenetrable and exclusive. In the beginning everything was flexible and there were no rules. Kim puts in the effort to organize a show that the artist, himself, forgets to attend (24). A few people hang out well into the early morning, but there was seemingly very little 'pay-off'.

Zittel's iterations of DIY and the DIY ethos behind Kim's Tiny Creatures share some common ground. Kim starts Tiny Creatures as a response to what she sees as a need in her community and a response to the current climate of LA: a place for her friends whose work she admires to show. Like Zittel, she places herself outside of a system, but in a way which still allows movement to and from it. Kim makes things happen: “[s]he cracks the whip on these freaks” (20). She takes people who are uninterested/unable to have their work shown to an outside audience. The practically non-existent budget and lack of professional standards lent a sense of urgency and immediacy to the shows. Kim talks about having no tools and hanging work with old rope and cans of beans (26). The use of drugs like speed by many of the people involved played a large role in the frantic energy surrounding the space. It seems clear that Kim gave everyone free reign to do whatever they wanted. Her role was to make sure that *something* happened. She wants to do things her way, with a flagrant disregard for the larger art-world context. She is not interested in professional standards or commodifiable work. The

most “ambitious” show at Tiny Creatures is also the last (41). However, the coolness of Tiny Creatures remains desirable. Despite her position against the established art world, LA's rich and elite are ready to buy her brand. This desire allows for survival in a context of poverty, drug use and uncertain futures<sup>2</sup>.

Jan Verwoert in his article *Crooked Modernisms Oh, Crooked Indeed!*, writes about the danger of the modernist dream, which he identifies as the desire to arrive— into the modern world or onto a scene, and the sticky path between a manifesto and its implementation (223). Kim seems to have desired something like making a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a total work of art where the boundaries of life and art are blurred or non-existent. She tells Kraus, “I realized I'd found people who I felt I could dream with . . . [I]t had been this dream of mine, to be a part of an underground scene like the Dadaists, the Beats John Cage, and the Happenings” (18). Kim's dream is mostly utopic fantasy: a fantasy that in part may have contributed to Tiny Creatures eventual failure<sup>3</sup>. Out of all the speculation as to why it closed, what resonates as true is that Kim's refusal to participate and perform as the hip gallerist, though an important gesture, was, in the current context, a death wish. Kim may have wanted a utopia, but besides wanting to spend time with friends, value what they were making, and build a ‘happening’ scene, there was what writer and musician Matt Fishbeck refers to as “unorthodox and uncertain living” (Kraus 11). This seems to be a reference to drug habits that “would blossom to crippling habits” (21). Kim laments:

It was just very dark. Eventually I never came out of the back. I would just lie in bed smoking and drinking and everyone thought I was this powerhouse alternative curator! I'm not a gallerist...I don't know what they thought. It was supposed to be just a bunch of friends. By then I was old enough to realize that if this goes on we're gonna be fucked, we're gonna be homeless. Real estate was out of control... Drugs added to the excitement of the place. I don't know if I would have done anything different. But it had to stop. (qtd in Kraus 37)

2 See Kraus 25, 28 for Fishbeck's opinion on why Kim chose use art as a way to make a living.

3 Not a failure as a space but failure in the sense that the space was forced to close down. See Kraus 40 for an explanation of the financial troubles that plagued Tiny Creatures

Kim's dream had become a nightmare. There was a lot of pressure for her to take the ball and run with it. Jason Yates, one of the Tiny Creatures artists, states:

“[c]ollectively we were the hippest thing in the country. Janet Kim...doesn't care about money. We were all broke and people were burning up wanting the work. [...] I was like, Janet, we all trust you to take this to the next level and she just folded under the pressure, she didn't have that skill set. And she wouldn't listen to anyone else!” (qtd. in Kraus 32)

Kim refuses to play the game and it hurts everyone. However, Yates seems to be the loudest dissenter. Kraus writes that although “[s]ome of the artists would go on to receive mainstream representation while others would not [...] most [...] remain atypically gracious”(21).

## **5. Crooked Modernisms “The Silence and Eloquence of the thing”**

Jan Verwoert defines modernism as something generally considered to be the straight way, but might be better understood as the crooked way. For him, modernism is about the desire for conflicting things like “truth *and* intensity” or “materialism *and* spirituality” (217). It also suffers from conflicted definitions of what “things” are in the first place. Things are not only material, “brute facts,” but also “historical indexes”. On one hand, we want to end the silence of the object and “render the world readable historically, socially, [and] structurally” (225). On the other, we want the need for all interpretation to disappear, “because life in this new world would, in fact, in its very material presence, be as good and true as any art could ever be”(225). We want either “pure ideas” or to “abolish the mediation”(225). Verwoert's proposal is to accept this tension as fact and embrace it as essential to modernism. He writes:

We might come to appreciate precisely the crookedness of many modernist works that-- involuntarily or deliberately – embody that contradictory duality of being silent and talkative, mute in their thingness and telling in their historicity, beautifully dumb and intelligent at the very same time. (226)

Such an embrace of crookedness is a way of emphasizing both of these parts of modernism: patching them together in a way that allows them to always be reminding us of the others presence and providing a little running-room in between.

Kim's attempt to carve out space was successful in changing the gallery scene in LA and giving visibility to artists at the margins of the art world. However, it was short-lived and ultimately untenable. Many of the people involved in Tiny Creatures were sucked (back?) into the art institution or the music industry. Jan Verwoert talks about the arriviste: someone who has arrived, made it big, and has the material goods and wealth to show for it (229). In the wake of Tiny Creatures, many people had 'arrived'. Echo Park had been gentrified and people of all sorts—dealers, collectors, artists, musicians—all arrived somewhere brighter and newer than where they were before. Still, there were many people who never managed to arrive. They are still waiting.

Perhaps becoming an arriviste is the beginning of the end for most artists. We have a strong desire to arrive and for that arrival to take the form of a certain material stability. In arriving, Verwoert asserts, we enter a timeless space of total gain. In this space, we actively deny any loss. One of the Tiny Creatures artists, Jason Yates, states that Kim could have “stepped up and made everyone a lot of money”(32). Here, Yates plays the role of the arriviste and denies the loss of Tiny Creatures. In Verwoert's words, he goes “back to business as usual in search of acquiring the capital and status that would confirm his arrival in the modern world” (233).

Zittel fits, perhaps inadvertently, into the figure of Verwoert's arriviste, which stands in contrast to her desire to “move further out into the desert” (Zittel 15). Now that she has arrived, she has begun to feel trapped in her designs and their connections to objects of bad faith. Part of her project seems on a trajectory towards freedom from the confines she has built for herself. Having arrived, she would like to be able to escape; she would like to have it both ways.

DIY is both professional and unprofessional in that it requires you to assume the role of a professional only so that you may not quite live up to it. It remains on the edge and is often called upon when running away or when resources are scarce. When we are DIYing, we re-evaluate the process of making things: claiming and making new spaces where and when we need them most. In Joris-Karl Huysmans', *Against Nature*, the sole character Des Esseintes retreats from his wild and decadent life in late 1800's Paris into an elaborate and artificial world of his own making. His retreat is an experi-

ment of sorts, where his goal is to replace all of nature and “real” world experience with a mediated version of his own invention. In the end Des Esseintes is forced to give up his fantasy and return to the real world. His attempt to do everything himself is about control, which brings him to depression and the brink of death. In thinking about the role that art plays in our lives the character of Des Esseintes is key. He combines two ideas: the way we mediate our lives through things or objects (in art/design/architecture) and the way this is linked to an attempt to retreat or escape from the modern world. Des Esseintes character exists at the cusp of this modern world (before many modernist movements like that of the Bauhaus for instance). A comparison can be made to Adolf Loos' character of the rich man in his 1908 treatise, *Poor Little Rich Man*. If only these characters were given an opportunity to take apart all the things they had been given make them anew.

Foster's article is speaks to the ways in which our lives are occupied by contemporary design. However, if we take this idea and apply it to Steyerl's essay/thought experiment *Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life*, which asks us to consider the ways that art is occupying our lives, we see that Foster's designed subject and Steyerl's occupied subject are one and the same. She asks:

“[h]ave you been beautified, improved, upgraded or attempted to do this to anyone/thing else? Has your rent doubled because a few kids with brushes were relocated into that dilapidated building next door? Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone?”(Steyerl)

We are much like Des Esseintes: free to design our own content and make our own worlds. This type of DIY culture seems stifling to the point of panic. This is why it is important to be able to give it up, to let it go, while still holding onto the fantasy.

In the neat package of Starling's *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)*, DIY is used as the both the means and ends of the work. Practical considerations such as the material, transportation and installation of the work are woven together through Starling's DIY performance of these acts. The mundane or logistical parts of art making become important in understanding the work and DIY becomes integral to each aspect. Within art, DIY is a tool that is often used to allow the artist to create running room. It is a

contested space, occupied for different reasons and with varying results. It prepares the artist to respond to shifting conditions, be they economic or procedural, and change course at a moments notice.

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