

Walk Artisanal

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In 1999, two business authors coined the term “Experience Economy” to describe a new profit model based on the logging, aggregation, promulgation and eventual monetization of raw subjective experience. Their mantra, “Goods and services are no longer enough,” became the rallying cry of businesses like Build a Bear Workshop, Geek Squad, and Nike Lab, and their strategies, such as the creation of environments and “transformational encounters” rather than stores and transactions, have subsequently come to inflect newer experience-mongers: AirBnb, Uber, Tinder, Kickstarter, etc. Further capitalizing on a widespread distaste for the faceless corporation, a wave of local but often proliferation-aspirational businesses took to creating monetized artisanal encounters: A coffee shop where beans are roasted behind a floor-to-ceiling glass window; A speakeasy-style bar that is accessed by walking through a functioning barber shop; A “dirty soda” store featuring “taste specialists” to collaborate with the guest in the creation of a never-before-attempted beverage. Behind this, the new artisan: a craftsperson for whom the very attempt to do or make something was, itself, the commodity.

While the 21st century consumer may be accustomed to the notion that s/he is, her/himself, “for sale,” what is less widely considered is the utterly unselfconscious pastiche of business management anecdotes, performance art lessons, and coffee-table philosophy that shaped this turn. Through strategies titled “Mass Customization,” “Work as Theater” and “Collaborative Transformation,” the business of offering a product for sale is transmogrified

into an ill-defined pantomime; the buyer, too can no longer simply consume, but must now also perform her/his consumption. Once it is revealed that everyone—service-sector employee, factory manager, craft laborer, retail shopper—is simply “having an experience,” the empathy required to purchase a shower curtain, the voyeurism commonplace to a taxi app ride, or the interpretive handholding needed to order a sandwich, are acknowledged as cultural symptoms and added to the evolutionary toolkit. There is no longer a way to use a product or service that runs counter to its design, because novel or unconventional uses are now part of the script. Accustomed to being told they are “creative people,” who “have something to say,” a new generation of consumers craft their identity out of the kudzu of e-commerce: reputation and relatability. If the project of late 90’s retail was to transform the store into a kind of inert vibe-incubator reminiscent of domestic space (and later giving rise to phenomena such as “showrooming”—the practice of visiting a store to test out a product only to purchase it online at a lower price) today’s is far more ambitious: the conversion of all personal social encounters into transactional nodes. Now hopefully in its death throes, defined by its authors as the moment when experience is recalcified back into a tangible commodity (think TurboTax), the horror of aggregated banality masquerading as creative potential has nevertheless given rise to a surprising embrace of the generic.

It seems clear to us that there is a historical precedent for these ambitions in history’s successive “dematerializations” of the art object: scatter, site/non-site, process, institutional critique, installation, relational art, interventionism. Artists redefined the passively situational/experiential as a site for creative potential, and in turn this site was overrun with hybridized junkspace capitalism. Does an economic landscape where the commodity has dematerialized itself into subjective experience permit a return to the truly functionless art object, engaged in an open questioning of its own social status and permissiveness? We propose a “Demonstrative Form,” akin to a QVC product demonstration (with attendant emphasis on the aesthetics of the parlor trick), wherein a product with no true necessity is presented as a heroic timesaving or life-altering cultural development. It is the burden of such an object to embody its necessity in its very materiality; to “object to” a set of social circumstances and to propose change through a set of hypothetical interactions. If a “demonstration” requires a group of viewers all becoming aware of each other’s subjectivity and drawing on consensus for collective action, and the Experience Economy seeks to decouple collective experience in the service of endlessly individuated encounters, it seems the potential for a post-experience artwork lies in a return to the caustic, albeit peaceable compromise of “agreeing to disagree.”

One. There is an engagement with producing under the conditions of late capitalism—a depiction of the artist as consumer of art materials that are themselves “experience products” with attached use narratives. The artwork engages with its own ecological facticity by recapitulating the production circumstances of its raw material or component parts.

Two. The work can be thought of as operating within or even hijacking the modus operandi of commoditized experience. If the consumer has a daily encounter with fictive making through the available subjectivity of the artisanal worker (and this fricate proximity is “felt”), and the

performance of manufacturing and selling necessitates a performance of consuming (which is itself transformed into currency via the aggregation and ranking of banal criticism), and the consuming process is no longer about using/decoding but about feeling/transforming, the artwork, already dematerialized several times over, is free once again to engage in the humble business of creating sensations.

Three. The song of making's triumphal return is sung in the key of the liberal consumer lifestyle product: mythologized supply chain, truth-to-material assembly, individuated skinning, tautological sustainability, self-congratulatory orientation. The work's technical sweetness is modulated in real-time by the viewer/collaborator, who participates in its "showrooming." Formerly transgressive or "ad hocist" modalities are then offered as readymade behaviors.

Four. The craft article, variously spiritual/therapeutic, long understood as the presentation of an activity, is now moreover a "less-than" object bearing the burden of further adjunct making. As the creative attempt is itself enframed as product ("trying to make something"), ends are forestalled, while an infinitely extensible set of transactional values is attached to ways and means.

Five. Work is selected on the basis of demonstrative form; the extent to which it proposes to illustrate its function or intended use on its own terms and via its objecthood. The work's soapbox-ness enumerates its necessity.