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## On David Schater's Drawings

The rationalization of public space takes place on a number of levels: once this project was explicitly utopian and had to do with highly centralized planning. From the Haussmanization of Paris to Frederick Law Olmsted's work on urban park spaces, the optimism of the early years of modernism has left us with a dense legacy of the dreams of our ancestors. In a sense, David Schater's work has, in moving from the scale of public art to the problems of drawing, followed the trajectory of modernity's transformations. Schater is still interested in the design of public spaces on many levels (architecturally and musically), but his interventions have an increased intensity even as they work through a reduced scale. In a way, these drawings represent the "thinking out loud" of an artist reflecting on the highly mediated, and almost improbable relationship between three-dimensionality and the picture plane.



The intense discursivity of these drawings, I would argue, arises from the fact that they are dealing with the historicity of modernity's decline: the reason that modernity brought to all questions of design has been fully mobilized for the purposes of providing consumer comfort and determining ideal consumer behavior. That the viewer of contemporary art might be consumer and consumed is the problem raised by the fast-food furniture configurations which abstract the bodily relationship to a kind of pure functionality comprising Schafer's tweaked groupings of standard restaurant stool seating.

How the group no longer embodies a collective bonded by love or interest is one poignant insight that Schafer's "clusters" evoke: the multiplicity of mass-produced fast food furniture can be aestheticized once it is completely deterritorialized in a gallery space whose difference from the fast-food joint is based on its refusal to offer certain forms of comfortable consumerism or connoisseurship. The three-dimensionality of the sculptures raises all sorts of intellectual questions that the drawings allude to, but succeed at the same time in deferring, for the more quiet and idiosyncratic contemplation that arises when the evidence of the hand, of the tentative gesture, and the experiment with color is made visible. If Schafer is dealing with mass manufacturing of urban design

and public art (in "Pastoral Mirage,") music (in the form of Muzak in "Now Playing Bert Kaempfert Resequenced") and in automobiles (in the "A Grammatical Study of Ethics, Economics and Technology (1973 Ford Pinto) Partial View"), the drawings provide an intimate look at the way in which the artist works through his relationships to visual and sculptural problems on various scales.

The intensity of the personal investment is legible, but not necessarily visible in the drawings, and the delicacy of the visualization of a private relationship to modernity's design history and its lost utopian dreams is what is most complex and most moving about this work. A short history of modernity's designs upon the human experience of space is now embedded in the biographies of the citizens of the twentieth century: the democratization of design principles was made possible through mass manufacturing, and a rigorously modernist relationship to visual culture abjured nostalgia as a reactionary stance. These issues have to be taken on now in the context of the failure of the great utopian schemes of the early twentieth-century be they fascist or communist: in the realm of artistic production, the exploration of a private history of the twentieth century can take place on the level of intimacy that abjures grand gestures for small ones. Renouncing the hyperbolic ambitions of projects



critical of modernity for an ironic reflection on teen years spent in fetishization of vehicles designed for the death-drive, negative utopianism of American suburbia, Schafer refers to the ways in which fantasies of quiet private comforts and minimal public appearances produced a culture of teen sexuality and teen rebellion that turned around the space and the dreams of the automobile. Violence was always ready to explode, whether in the poor design of an automotive deathtrap, or in the self-destructive rages of objectless teen longing. The Ford Pinto as death-drive machine also named suburban nostalgia for the lightness of the wild ponies and the emptiness of a frontier — the projection of a nomadic life on the plains. As politically and ethically incorrect as the Pinto may have been, it looks rather humble next to the Ford Expedition, whose bloated body lurches into the twenty-first century, not on the light swift feet of a wild pony metaphor, but rather on the dreams of a new and improved heroic project of discovery and conquest.

Schafer's drawings are reminiscent of collages by Kurt Schwitters, who in capturing the texture of everyday life, was also able to bear testimony to the vertiginous experience of political upheaval in the first half of the century. Indirectness is the simple aesthetic strategy by which personal nostalgia is freed from the restrictions of expressivity and pathos, and is

endowed with the power to bestow upon the artistic or literary object, the quieter, less strident power of metonymy and metaphor to evoke loss and mourning. In these drawings, we can recognize bits and pieces of ourselves, of the everyday life of a century that is quickly becoming history. Considered as a series, it is their difference from each other that is most striking, a graphic counterpoint that is both theoretical and visual. The critical and careful analysis that Schafer performs on the instrumentalization of space in fast-food environments, of careless consumerism, is accompanied in by an equally intense reflection on the public and private spaces of the twentieth century. In this series of drawings we find the floor plan of Schafer's childhood home. Here, the tonal variation of the drawings changes once again. We find embedded in them an elegiac note and a sign that Schafer's highly conceptual strategies have managed to produce a hard-won tone of lyricism that rigorous artists of our time renounce as points of departure, only to give in to, intermittently out of respect and restraint, before the impossible-to-account-for losses of modernity's decline.

Catherine Liu  
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