

## ***Wholesale: To The Trade Only***

***A dialogue -- J. Morgan Puett & Iain Kerr, October 2006***

***Iain Kerr***

...Let us go back to what you were saying about your reasons for returning to grad school. When I went back to graduate school it was really to figure out ways to be engaged with the complexities of life. I was less interested in the exclusions that art practices can develop or in any particular art practice per se as a distinct field of inquiry and ultimately I was more concerned and engaged in the production of structures and systems to investigate the question of what kind of subjects can we become today -- what new ways can we organize our lives. Back then I was doing many things at once -- looking all over -- at mapping systems, geography, science, biology, history and anthropology -- and out of all of this I was developing research centers and types of pseudo laboratories. These were complex research works that became enormously complex installations -- often very autobiographical -- that at some point became my living spaces as well as sites of production...  
...many of these projects began to use uniforms and various clothing systems, and after a certain point people wanted to buy the clothing straight out of the installations -- at first it was mainly architects -- and then many others. It does seem significant that these early works where various types of research centers and then you moved from these into the world of fashion. It was a realization for me that I could approach these practices in a more complex and effective manner if I invented my own practice -- and this needed to be at a slight remove from the gallery system to allow me personally the ability to make a more rigorous and experimental practice...

...Part of this, to go back to your early work, involved the development of new forms and modes of dwelling. Architecture and the question of basic units of dwelling such as vernacular huts, shacks, and sheds have always been fundamental -- the forms of ad hoc and close to bare sustenance living were key as modes of experimentation for me...  
...also how the shack and hut play such a key role in the works of people like Thoreau, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gandhi and others -- in such a complex manner...

...a really important moment in all of this early work was on a visit to the Metropolitan clothing collection -- I was very interested in working class clothing of the depression era and doing research into these clothes -- fabrics, dying, economies of goods etc. -- and so I asked to see examples of these -- well, to cut a long story short, they had none -- now for me it was not just a question of simply a missing history that needed to be recuperated -- I had already personally exhausted this approach -- what was a real shock, for me, was the reason that the curator gave for there being no clothes of this period -- that these clothes were objects in constant transformation -- skirts would transform into pants which would be cut into shorts which, as they became too worn, would be cut up into pieces for quilts, and as these quilts broke down, the

mass of fabrics would then be used for quilt and wall insulation -- or for rugs and rags -- till finally there where just dust. It was this practice of continuous modulation and transformation that really influenced the conceptual direction of my own practices in the eighties -- and it was something that I only began to fully understand later as I read Deleuze and his ideas in regards to what he called "control society"...

... well, suffice to say, I began to understand and experiment in this transversal manner that was both theoretically rich and grounded in these vernacular tactics of getting by...

.....anyway, I was making these elaborate stores as conceptual projects that where retail spaces that could act as a site to foster and support multiple experimentations in modes of living and subject production... ... there were collaborations with friends -- not that I could mention them all -- Jason Simon, Rhonda Lieberman, Mark Dion, Amy Yoes, the Purcell's -- and so many others -- writers, poets, musicians, photographers ... ... we were all involved in developing and co-evolving a whole set of practices and methodologies... ... there where experiments in theatre works, architecture, clothing, farming, lifestyle products, installations, a cafe, a gallery ... we could go on for a long time about this...

...another thing that I realize about these practices of the eighties and nineties -- and I think that this is part of what you were saying about why you revisited this piece -- well yes, just to quickly say -- this piece is a rethinking of the eighties and nineties as a general terrain -- the re-staging of this piece from the *Centre d'Art contemporain Kunsthalle* became the critical vehicle to do this...

... well for me there is this realization that while many others where reading Foucault in relation to systems of knowledge and power to the exclusion of his work on governmentality and biopower your work did engage both of these strands, and one gets the feeling that for you, and your collaborators, you were co-evolving a practice that was in relation to these concepts of the economic subject and biopolitics...

...yes, what really struck me then and still strikes me now, is that with his idea of biopower is the claim that the modern subject is best thought of not as a consumer -- the whole "I shop therefore I am" discourse -- but as fully economic subject -- as an individual directed towards production and exchange...

...I have always been close to a refusal to be involved a simple critique of consumption. Certainly, yes -- this was quite distinct -- I have been fascinated by how the contemporary liberal subject is one who constantly modulates forms of self-creation in relation to costs and rewards. Well -- I am interested, that given this environment, how these sites of commerce can offer new ways to think these questions -- new forms of labor practice, new forms of sociality -- or as Deleuze says "new forms of Individuation"...

...and most importantly that these were actual experiments -- practices and not just a momentary installation about these ideas. Which mirrors your alternative to the approach(es) of institutional critique which seems to stress, in regards to this conversation, Foucault's ideas of discipline and normalization -- while your ap-

appropriation of his ideas of biopower and governmentality seem to suggest that there is a limit to the partial application of his and others work -- yes yes -- this is very important to my work -- I have always felt that we cannot separate ourselves from the complex and amorphous spaces of institutions that would allow for such forms of critique to have a complex actualization and not simply an ideological purchase. I have always been more interested in how we can produce new forms of institutions -- these are after-all types of individuations are they not?... I have spent alot of time recently reading in regards to this -- and this has really influenced much of my thinking about the limits of critique -- especially of the type of overly semiotic, and representationally centered discourses... ..much of this comes into play in the reworking of this piece... ..and obviously in our changing relations to forms of subjectivity, lifestyle production, identity, consumerism, branding...

...well, shifting topics, there is one thing that always struck me in your work and that was this different relation to history -- this insistence and refusal to look "modern" while being very contemporary. Well, yes -- exactly -- all periods that are the present are actually contemporary -- the Victorian, for example, is still with us -- the idea of a modern look is too caught up in certain forms of avant garde discourse for me -- it is quite nostalgic -- the whole focus on an ideology of the clean, the simple, the discreet and pure... ..well these are values, systems and practices that we need to be moving away from -- you know for me -- just to be simple for a moment -- all periods and all histories are available to us and are pressing in on us -- it is a question of how we activate this turbulent multiplicity... ..given this it seems in this work it is never a question of high and low art (which did seem to be so much a part of what ways being touted then) but rather a question of where you situate the space of praxis and action -- is it in a gallery or a storefront etc. -- and not just those two options. I am always asking in this work what is a difference worth having and which is simply an ideological posture? ..in this regards the quotidian was always a starting point -- what were people and communities that interested me actually doing?...

...finally what really got me interested in looking back -- in doing a type of history of the present -- was a chance to reflect from the middle of the projects I am now undertaking -- on this history of the 80's and 90's as way to rethink this period, to reflect upon directions that were not taken, and to map out the further development of a series of practices not fully developed, or theorized -- ones we just intimated at... ..a set of what I thought then -- and still think now are critical alternatives. This is to a large degree a project of my continuous revisiting and creatively rethinking histories and more importantly the development of possible futures...