

Shannon Lyons
*A dead mouse and a
broken coffee machine*

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broken coffee ma-
chine*
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It's hard to find a good café

What is the difference between the social space enacted around a rectilinear prism in a gallery to its placement in a café or a lounge-room? What systems can we use to understand the sociability that cuts across these different site contexts? It's clear that the notion of function can't be reduced to a set of values found outside the field of art.¹

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¹This problem is exemplified in the minimalist practice and discourse surrounding Donald Judd's artworks and furniture. In Judd's writing regarding the difference between these two forms of production, incongruent attitudes to value emerge as he discusses the differences between the rarefied space of his blue-chip art with the rarefied space of his designer furniture. Judd notes, ... "someone asked me to design a coffee table. I thought that a work of mine which was essentially a rectangular volume with the upper surface recessed could be altered. This debased the work and produced a bad table which I later threw away. The configuration and the scale of art cannot be transposed into furniture and architecture. The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional... I am often asked if the furniture is art, since almost ten years ago some artists made art that was also furniture. The furniture is furniture and is only art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles and many things are art. We try to keep the furniture out of art galleries to avoid this confusion, which is far from my thinking. And also to avoid the consequent inflation of the price. I am often told that the furniture is not comfortable, and in that not functional." Donald Judd, "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp," http://s3.amazonaws.com/juddfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/12120628/ItsHardToFind_Writings_DonaldJudd.pdf (accessed February 7, 2018).

But whatever I say about café culture within the institutional space of art will mark my place within a milieu.² It is a kind of trap as any criticism of this melding of spaces will probably make me sound like an anti-populist—a snob. It might be more socially (and critically) acceptable to take a connoisseur’s approach to the coffee on offer, regardless of the Melbournean posturing surrounding one’s coffee order, no one wants a bad flat white, right?

The café has become the safe space of the museum. The art might alienate you but this overpriced muffin and coffee will make you feel at ease. This addition to the cultural sphere is supposed to have removed a symbolic barrier to the consumption of art.³ Paradoxically, the increased presence of restaurants, bars and cafés has in most part correlated to the museum becoming more open to fun experiences that turns the gallery into a photo-booth for your next Instagram post. The museum as a whole is now not just a public good that preserves culture from within an austere space, that disseminates cultural knowledge and history, perpetuating the values of the state—it is now part of your lifestyle. A cafeteria might always have been tucked away in some corner of the museum; an over-priced restaurant located near the members’ lounge; now these spaces of hospitality are front and centre. The museum has become a space for your late-night drinks, your dancing, your networking, your child care centre, your child’s enculturation.

² I am someone obsessed by food and food culture. And whilst I justify and link this to sustenance and my cultural heritage, I also feel very uneasy about the old *Gourmet Travellers* under my bed and my willingness to line up for Andrew McConnell’s ice cream cart at the back of the NGV as part of their *Triennial Extra* program. This interest in food is increasingly pop-cultural (and predictable). At a family lunch, I was surprised to hear a critical vocabulary used towards the culinary from young teenagers exposed to reality television’s judgement on “elevated” kitchen processes.

³ Pierre Bourdieu notes, “Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to the power relations.” Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1977); L.D. Wacquant, “Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu,” *Sociological Theory* 7 (1989)

This has reached spectacular proportions (and I am sure record-breaking audience figures) at the recent Melbourne Triennial, where the inaugural exhibition has hosted 10 days and nights of DJs, bands, wining, dining, drinks and dancing.⁴ In publicity for events like this there is an emphasis on the entry being free. Within certain polite parameters, if you subtract the expense of the catering and the immoral detention of refugees by the same security firm that stays guard for the *Weeping Woman*, it is free. But at what cost? How does the art shift to accommodate the wining, dining, drinks and dancing? Is the event free from benchmarks set by a marketing agenda?

But what if the café is the artwork? A café can be an artwork like anything else. The café ordinarily functions as a social space of consumption. An artwork that functions in this capacity is heteronomous – in its values are drawn from fields outside of art.⁵ Regardless of their overall aesthetic experience and appeal, we value cafés for a number of reasons that have nothing to do with art. Cafés are good for coffee; they accommodate our social interactions; facilitate our freelance work; they sometimes serve us food. Here a line has been drawn. I am understanding the café as an entity that sits outside the artistic field.⁶ The problem is that I’m saying that the predominant values derived

⁴ At the National Gallery of Victoria’s *Triennial Extra* event there were 6 bars, 3 restaurants and 2 DJs.

⁵ The artist Jorge Pardo’s offers a counterpoint on a rhetorical level to the role of function in the field of art. For example, his whole practice is categorised as sculpture on his website. This rhetoric is not about conflating art and design but about creating distinctions between the fields. This can be dealt with in three ways: ignored as a total conceit; understood as the artist’s cue for how an audience should translate the furniture-turned-sculpture into an idea; or a way of privileging the artist role over other roles that suspiciously look identical. This means whilst sitting at a Pardo designed bar, riding a Pardo designed speed boat, visiting a Pardo designed house or assembling a Pardo lamp you don’t necessarily value the experience of the function like you would with an equivalent designed object or space.

⁶ There are some key examples of hospitality-driven projects firmly engaged within the field of art. Arguably these projects are outliers to our rudimentary experiences of cafés. A historical precedent like Gordon Matta-Clark, Carol Gooden and Tina Girourd’s *Food* project is a pertinent example however.



from a café are not artistic and that another set of criteria should be used to make an assessment of its worth. A distinction has been made regarding the aesthetic: regarding the aesthetics of the social; the social as a form of cultural production; and regarding the role of design within art. Ultimately this is a conservative measure, as it is differentiating between things in the supposed flattened field of culture. The indeterminate boundaries and experiences of the social resist the imposition of fixed set of norms that slip-and-slide from one field into another.⁷ This makes it difficult for some conservative tendencies within art production and art history to remain relevant and to be replicated, allowing for various ideological turf wars to ensue.

A pure artistic autonomy is not possible, for those with political inclinations it's not desirable, for art employing a design methodology nonsensical. Soviet Constructivism, De Stijl and Bauhaus incorporated design as an ideological imperative for cultural production. Michael White has written that De Stijl was “clearly grounded in the promiscuous relationship of modernist form to commerce, advertising, lifestyle and the street.”⁸ And Henri Lefebvre described the Bauhaus practitioners as understanding “that things could not be created independently of each other in space, whether movable (furniture) or fixed (building), without

⁷The art historian Grant Kester's approach to socially-engaged art practices doesn't box practices between an opposition of social and artistic fields. Kester emphasises “a continuum of collaborative and relational practices.” Kester highlights practices that, while not negating their artistic identity, also claim to be forms of social activism. The practices identified by Kester are less concerned with overt aestheticism than by their social consequences. Slipping between fields is part of their strategy of being effectively critical; they deploy the term art only when useful for the overall social cause. Grant Kester, “Another Turn: Letter,” *Artforum* (May 2006): 22; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 56

⁸ Michael White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)

taking into account their interrelationships and their relationships to the whole.”⁹ But this historical challenge to art's autonomy by design takes on a different character within a late-capitalist experience economy. Miwon Kwon has noted that whilst people like myself are interested in the “destabilised state of medium specificity and disciplinary categories,” in a contemporary context this ceases to be a critical intervention in the exclusive parameters of institutional art but a more run of the mill “de-differentiation that pervades cultural experience.”¹⁰ I wonder how an artist can engage design in a critical capacity without relapsing into mood lighting and the shop-floor?¹¹

For the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu “relative autonomy” entails a set of conditions (particular and/or dominant in each respective field) that separate one social field from another.¹² Artistic autonomy for me is fraught, dubious and sometimes even delusional.

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 124.

¹⁰Miwon Kwon echoes Hal Foster's position in “Design and Crime,” where he notes that the field of design “takes on a new resonance today, when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything—not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genetics—seems to be regarded as so much *design*.” For Foster, it is within design culture that the crimes against subject-hood are committed. Foster asks “To what extent has “the constructed subject” of postmodernism become “the designed subject” of consumerism?” Hal Foster, “Design and Crime” in *Design and Crime and other Diatribes*, New York Verso 2002; Miwon Kwon, “Jorge Pardo's Designs on Design” in Alex Coles, ed. *Design and Art*. London Whitechapel, 2007.

¹¹The artist Joe Scanlan has noted “where institutional critique hopes to disrupt the illusion of cultural authority by revealing the mechanisms that buttress it, design art hopes to democratise that authority by providing mood lighting and comfortable chairs. Institutional critique is based on argumentation; design art on salesmanship.” Joe Scanlan and Neal Jackson, “Please, Eat the Daisies,” *Art Issues*, (January/February, 2001): 26-29. It can be argued however that design in its own right can simultaneously encompass a critical perspective on the social in a more reflexive capacity than some art practice that is oblivious to the economic and stylistic imperatives that underpin cultural practice. For design this commercialism can be interpreted as a highly responsive relation to social, political and environmental shifts over time. Part of any design process almost always accounts for the changing contexts that host and produce the product.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 55.

As artists, we make and present artwork for many reasons that emerge out of a set of cultural conditions and provocations. It's often difficult to disentangle these artistic motivations from omnipresent social, economic and psychological relations that influence the artwork being made. We often don't acknowledge these drives, denying they exist as they allow us to continue playing the game, or perpetuating our self-interest over the space of others.¹³ Sometimes however, our artworks are instrumentalised by other agents, used by organisations in a capacity that undermines the tenuous autonomy the artwork had to begin with.

A dead mouse and a broken coffee machine is a relatively autonomous artwork even though it uses (in part) structures, processes and material languages—a barista, design practice, café furniture and paraphernalia, conversation and hospitable settings—that ordinarily rely on economic and social values to be legitimated. There is a thin line that separates this café from one down the road or hypothetically one set up by an artist-run initiative in a push for social cache in lean times for cultural funding. This hypothetical is not as outlandish as it might first seem, considering the explosion of auxiliary functions galleries might lay claim to. At times an ambiguity between this auxiliary function and an artist's artwork is actively courted by the institutional management through a commissioning process that relegates the aesthetic of the café to an artist. As an artwork, this café might have a somewhat egalitarian motivation, the artist incorporating an aspect of the everyday within the gallery. To some

¹³ For Pierre Bourdieu, the term *illusio* is understood as the investment in the games we play in the social field we think on some level is worth playing, regardless of the ramifications to other agents. For Bourdieu, the *doxic attitude* is the suffering that is left unacknowledged so as to maintain the status-quo. To this effect he notes that: "the realistic, even resigned or fatalistic, dispositions which leads members of the dominated classes to put up with objective conditions that would be judged intolerable or revolting by agents otherwise disposed... help to reproduce the conditions of oppression." Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Oxford: Polity Press), 216.

degree this café wouldn't rely on specialised aesthetic knowledge for audience discernment and experience. It must be said that this version of the everyday can't be disentangled from consumerism, but this would be a more knowing and critical iteration of hospitality, considering the naïve implications giving away coffee might entail.¹⁴ There would still be questions regarding the egalitarian underpinning of such an enterprise. Is the café a site of symbolic violence through the designer trimmings and that barista attitude? Is an artwork-as-café a cultural pretension that divides those who get it, from those who don't? And doesn't any egalitarian (or democratic) aspiration to an abstract "everyone" raise suspicions immediately of those not welcome or not included? Never the less, the ambiguous role of the café disguises a managerial function for audience engagement, retention and expansion. And it's here that this unpacking of the hypothetical artist project merges easily with the marketing role of gallery administration.¹⁵

The important and razor-thin line that separates the café in Shannon Lyons' *A dead mouse and a broken coffee machine* from one down the road or one set up by a gallery is that it functions resolutely through its dysfunctional approach to competing and overlapping fields. This approach to function is not a stylistic posture played out in patches of plaster, wooden pallets and provisional scaffolding turned into seating; nor in a commercial imperative that sees your favourite

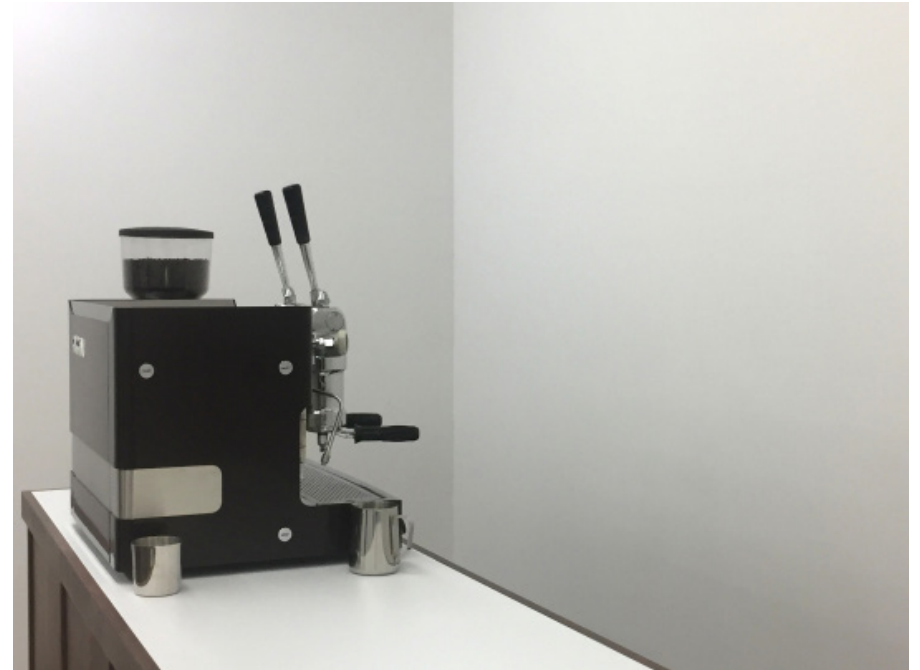
¹⁴ In relation to commodification of social practices Stewart Martin in his 2007 "Critique of Relational Aesthetics" critiques an audience's engagement with 'relational aesthetics' against Adorno's conception of autonomous art. For Martin, Nicolas Bourriaud's account of 'relational art' attains one sense of value from an autonomous and formalist understanding of art and another from society at large. Where Bourriaud presents relational forms as resisting commodification through their attention to social exchanges, Martin counters that sociability itself is easily subsumed within a capitalist paradigm as is evidenced by service industries, tourism and 'life-styling' of leisure and social ritual. Martin, Stewart. "Critique of Relational Aesthetics." *Third Text* 21, no. 4 (July 2007): 386-396.

¹⁵ Part of this argumentation is influenced by the artist Andrea Fraser engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's theory in Andrea Fraser, "Autonomy and its Contradictions," *Open, Autonomy* (No. 23, 2012): 106-115.

baguette sold out at 1.35 in the afternoon; or even that flirtation with that barista that knows your name. Our desires allow for these obstacles, interruptions and/or dead-ends to keep us coming back. A closed café outside of operating hours or a design artefact within a museum could also embed a social and economic dynamic (even its critique) within its form without a reliance on its enactment.¹⁶ In this artwork, in this audience engagement, the values are drawn not from the social opportunities found beneath the perfectly formed froth on your coffee but implications and the critical magnitude of the café as a type of dead-end.

And then there is the mouse.

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¹⁶ A reflexive critique of one's co-opted position within an unjust social framework might be an intellectual safety blanket but for Hal Foster this reflexivity can be a calculating "insider's game that renders the institution not more open and public but more hermetic and narcissistic, a place for initiates only where a contemptuous criticality is rehearsed.... The ambiguity of deconstructive positioning, at once inside and outside the institution, can lapse into the duplicity of cynical reason in which artist and institution have it both ways—retain the social status of art and entertain the moral purity of critique, the one a complement or compensation for the other." Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, by Hal Foster (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 196.

ACT 1

SCENE ONE

At an exhibition opening there are people gathered together in small groups. The occasional sound of glass bottles clinking against one another can be heard above the din of chatter and laughter. The gallery space is bathed in cool, even, bright light. A BARISTA is leaning against the wall, behind a coffee bar in the gallery, gazing down at a smart phone they hold in their hands. An EXHIBITION OPENING ATTENDEE approaches the coffee bar.

EXHIBITION OPENING ATTENDEE: *(clears throat to get attention)*

Pause

BARISTA: *(looks up from phone)*
Can I help you?

EXHIBITION OPENING ATTENDEE: Um, yeah. I'd love a skinny flat white.

BARISTA: *(a small, apologetic smile)*
Oh, I'm sorry. The coffee machine's broken.

THE END

A dead mouse and a broken coffee machine is a new site-responsive installation by Shannon Lyons that interrogates the relationship between a space of commercial hospitality - the café - and the supposedly non-commercial, contemplative gallery space. Encouraging the audience to consider the relationships between the two spaces, *A dead mouse and a broken coffee machine* agitates the coded social engagements embedded in each.

The exhibition continues Lyons' long-standing interest in the contemporary art gallery as a place replete with political, personal and poetic content.

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Shannon Lyons is an artist and educator based in Melbourne. Her work takes the form of sculptures, site-responsive installations, gestures and interventions that critically examine the sites they are produced and exhibited in. Lyons has recently exhibited at FELTspace (SA), Fontanelle (SA), Hugo Michell Gallery (SA), John Curtin Gallery (WA), Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery (WA), Moana Project Space (WA), Perth Institute for Contemporary Arts (WA), Success (WA) and SOMA (Mexico).

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