

Jessie Scott and
Zoe Diacolabrianos
Multidwelling

B

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CREATIVE
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Speculative Economies

“Culture is the commodity that sells all the others.”

– Situationist International

I

Labour

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Look mum, turns out that I *do* have a job – as a ‘knowledge worker’¹, a ‘symbolic analyst’², a cultural capitalist, a shaper of cities (for better and worse). I am my own hedge fund manager, futures trader, ponzi-schemer and property merchant, only you can’t live in what I sell (unless you are a culture-loving ant who aspires to hide out in a USB furnished with existential angst-data). I am both worker and boss in one; conditions are renegotiated according to the dictates of the market, but in general terms: wages are set below minimum without a safety net or superannuation and with no certain demand for supply.

1. Steyerl, Hito, ‘Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy’, *e-flux journal* #21, December 2010. 2 Ibid.

Like so many of my peers born into industrialised economies, I have worked a series of part-time jobs since the moment it was legal for me to do so: hairdresser's apprentice, fast food front-of-house, waiter, community arts worker, museum cultural officer and magazine editor. These jobs have always been both time-consuming and better-paid enough to displace my primary profession. Here, in my market-rental studio, I guess you could call what happens 'labour'; my post-Fordist production line is an ailing Jonathan Ives-device that contains less-than-legal software. I rise up in a Wikipedia-for-the-masses kind of way. As for what I make? It's a trick of light: digital fiction that strives to be analogous to some higher, always out-of-focus truth. It's speculation with all risk and almost no return.

II

Speculation

Hito Steyerl, the all-seeing Nostradamus of our post-representational times, says that contemporary art is "the purest form of neoliberalism... no unworldly discipline nestled away in some remote ivory tower. On the contrary, it is squarely placed in the



neoliberal thick of things.”³ For Steyerl, the hype, boom and bust associated with the buying and selling of contemporary art is analogous to the march of post-Cold War capitalism and geopolitical power-play with its globalised “credit addiction and bygone bull markets.”⁴ Is it a coincidence that Jeff Koons, art factory-owner, boss to over 90 assistants and one of the most spectacularly remunerated artists of our times, was also once a Wall Street commodities broker? From Chelsea, New York, to Collingwood, Melbourne: art, just like capital, “pollutes, gentrifies and ravishes”⁵.

Koons has built his career on riding the dual waves of money and art. The subdividing streets and Alucobond-covered developments of Coburg seem a world away, in content and form, from the vernissages and record secondary-market prices of the global contemporary art scene. Yet Scott’s choice to show this work in a gallery context as an un-funded exhibition within an artist run space with its own rental contract (the gallery itself a tenant within a larger post-industrial complex owned by an architect) brings money and real estate into the equation. In Scott’s enquiry and her choice of exhibition context and economic conditions, *Multidwelling* is implicated in the rise (and rise) of the Melbourne property market. Within the installation itself, the streetscape of Scott’s local neighbourhood acts as the new frontier in property speculation and the all-too rapid transformation of local built and social histories into generic housing ‘stock’. Post-war bungalows are bought up then razed; the ground below now far more valuable than the cultural value embedded in brickwork.

III

Suburban skin

“The suburb is Australia’s greatest achievement. Not it’s proudest... there’s no collective pride in the suburb, only a huge collection of individual prides.”

- Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*

3. Ibid

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

Scott met Zoe Diacolabrianos (graduate architect at WOWOWA) while in the process of renovating (not razing) her own post-war bungalow. The two collaborators have designed a sculptural form that sits between something you might view in a display suite, architecture studio or a Situationist's imagination: a pictorial, hexagonal-skinned meditation on the good, the bad and the Australian Ugliness. In his 1960 book *The Australian Ugliness*, Robin Boyd rallied against 'Featurism': what he saw as artifice, embellishments and kitsch in Australian culture and architecture that masked, he believed, a deep-seated anxiety about national



identity and cultural displacement. Scott's near-obsessive visual cataloguing of the transformation from the suburban Featurism of Boyd's time to our own contemporary developer-driven malaise depicts the attraction/repulsion that comes with gentrification. In the immortal cycle of cities and suburbs on the rise: first come the working class, then immigrants, then artists, then cafes, shops and live music. Once a locale has 'buzz' and becomes celebrated for its 'vibrancy' – it's curtains. Next will

come the unscrupulous developer and his vision of mediocrity writ as aluminium-framed, concrete-rendered multi-dwellings. Scott's photographs, her lurid acid-trip sunset video (beige new developments never looked so good!) and auctioneer-driven field recording soundtrack by Tarab (Eamon Sprodd) set the scene for ambivalence. With our bodies, eyes and ears, we sense the cultural fallout that comes with downsizing the Australian dream. The *dérive* and psychogeography of the Situationists is transposed to the waxing and waning housing typologies in the streets and surrounds of Scott's own neighbourhood.

IV Impermanence

Real Estate is not something that is seen as seductive or worthy of intellectual thought. Yet it is arguably the thing that most shapes our cities, our suburbs and our lives. Books on architecture abound, but where is the critical thinking and pedagogy on real estate? In his book *How Buildings Learn*, Stewart Brand (founder of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*) writes that the idea of permanence in architecture is an illusion: "A building is a verb and a noun. A 'building' is always building and rebuilding. The idea is crystalline, the fact fluid."⁶ To Brand, only 'flow' – the continual building, re-skinning and remodeling of our built environment – is constant. Fixes and ornamentation become features. Each building three lives, all at once: as habitat, as property and as a part of the surrounding community and context. As Brand says, "The most immediate conflict is financial. Is your house primarily a home or primarily an asset?"⁷ I can imagine him walking with Scott and her camera through the ever-developing, increasingly beige, ruins-in-reverse streets of Coburg as he muses on the tension between use-value (house-as-home) and market-value (house-as-property): "Seeking to be anybody's house it becomes nobody's."⁸

Eugenia Lim is an artist based in Melbourne.

6. Brand, Stewart, *How Buildings Learn*, Penguin Books, New York, 1994

7. Ibid

8. Ibid

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Bus Projects,
25–31 Rokeby Street,
Collingwood,
VIC 3066 Australia.
busprojects.org.au/