

WELCOME MY SON, WELCOME TO THE MACHINE. WHAT DID YOU DREAM?



IT'S ALRIGHT
WE TOLD YOU
WHAT TO DREAM¹

The group exhibition 'Provisorisches Yoga' at the Grazer Kunstverein introduces us to a moment in modernism when the value of decoration within society comes under scrutiny. This debate among key European thinkers including Adolf Loos, Karl Kraus and Siegfried Kracauer is used by the curators as a departure point. The works selected from the six artists included in the exhibition, represent a series of positions which ruminate on the central question of what is the ideal relationship between form (artistic, architectural or designed) and contemporary forms of living?

The installation *Latte Mama* (2009) by the group Fabric Interseason is the first work one encounters in the exhibition. It immediately sets the tone of the German 'Provisorisches' from the exhibition's title that translates to 'makeshift' 'provisional' or 'temporary' and in the exhibition comes to represent notions of freedom and emancipation. Three misé-en-scenes are strewn through the space, combining fitted bedsheets, children's high chairs, plastic bags, leather belts and nonslip rug savers, which together give the impression of an itinerate dweller moving through the gallery. The haphazardry of this arrangement contradicts the specificity of surface materials used in the work –from the press release we learn that the bedsheet is made of super fine raffia from Madagascar and the metal fencing is vacuum-coated with gloss RAL 9010 (white) paint.

The performing body is an artistic tool the curators utilise in a series of works to explore the intriguing term of 'Yoga' in their title and its implication of a harmony between body and mind. There are two video works presented which both capture the body lurching, swinging, weaving and climbing, and share a focus of such movement's corporeal relationship with architecture and design.

Henning Bohl in *Untitled*, 2009 (2001) presents twelve collapsible office tables amassed in the center of the gallery alongside a looped video made in situ at the Kunstverein. The video documents two workers who appear to be collapsing and re-assembling the tables, however with no clear goal to their actions our attention is drawn to the relationship between their bodies and the form of the table.

Jesper Nordahl's video *Breakdance* (2004) documents the spontaneous performance of a dance-come-gymnastic routine by a youth, keen to impress the 'tourist' with a camera. The work was developed while on residency at the abandoned military port of Karosta, in Western Latvia. The site's history is paramount to the work's ultimate reading and is visually implied by the dilapidated state of the social housing blocks captured in the background and the subtly outmoded clothing of the performer.

Together, these works tap into a meta-topic which reoccurs throughout the exhibition about the subtleties of control and emancipation within the built environment which involves not only the environment itself but the users actions or performance within it. The notion of Yoga here also extends this discussion to the very belief the performer has in the actions he or she stages.

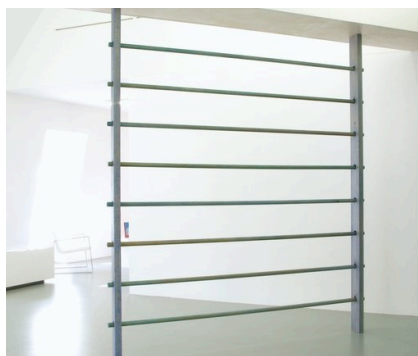


IMAGES:
Front page:
Storm Thorgerson
Album Artwork
by Pink Floyd
'Wish you Were Here'
(1975)

From Top:
Installation View,
Fabric Interseason
Latte Mama (2009)

Installation View of Video
Henning Bohl
Untitled, 2009 (2001)

Video Stills
Jesper Nordahl
Breakdance (2004)



An exciting spatial combination occurs in the exhibition with the inclusion of Michaela Meise's sculptural work *Sprossen* (2009) and artists' book *Ze Gym, der moderne koerper : gymnastik, bodybuilding, pilates, yoga* (2009). In the book work Meise focuses in part on the German/American founder of Pilates, Joseph Pilates Huber and juxtaposes images of body conditioning techniques from archival photographs and magazines with images of the home and its furnishings. *Sprossen* stands as a replica of one of the training apparatus featured in the book, but in the gallery it functions as a paravent or screen, dividing the exhibition space and reading area where the book is situated. In this way the work also divides the visitors presence and modes of interaction between inwardly engaging with the book work and being physically framed and activated by it's sculptural counterpart.

With a focus on these specific works and the curators underlying themes which stem from a predominantly Twentieth Century discourse, my purpose now is to explore links between their thematic, and an earlier point in North American and European history, when the relationship to space and habitation was ruptured by the inset of the industrial revolution.

With the abrupt force of a train steaming through the woods came a traumatic emptying of societies inherited symbolism of the rural as an idyllic place where a harmonious balance between humanity and space could be found. This loss concurrently displaced feelings of peace, harmony, life and closeness to our natural origin.

Through his study of American literature from the 1830s and 40s, Leo Marx identifies this moment in social history as 'The Machine in the Garden'². This event, he argues marked the emergence of a cultural divide between those who embrace industrial progress and capital drive and those who, in the face of growing order and complexity, wanted to

IMAGES:
Installation View
Michaela Meise
Sprossen (2009)
Wood

Michaela Meise
*Ze Gym, der moderne koerper :
gymnastik, bodybuilding,
pilates, yoga* (2009)
Artists Book

'get away' or seek an alternative. In Marx's argument evidenced through the analysis of selected literary output, the natural landscape became that mythical alternative.

What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Movement towards such a symbolic landscape also may be understood as a movement away from an 'artificial' world, a world identified with 'art,' using this word in its broadest sense to mean the disciplined habits of the mind or arts development by organised societies.³

One author Marx charges with seeking an alternative in nature is the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. Between 1845 and 1847 Thoreau built and lived in a solitary cabin within the woodlands of Waldon Pond. By temporarily situating himself between society and nature he intended to scrutinise the spiritual and economical benefits of a simplified life. This action and the resulting book 'Walden; or, Life in the Woods' (1854) has a dual function, it is in part a social critique of the era as well as a 'how to' guide for self-sufficient living.

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.⁴

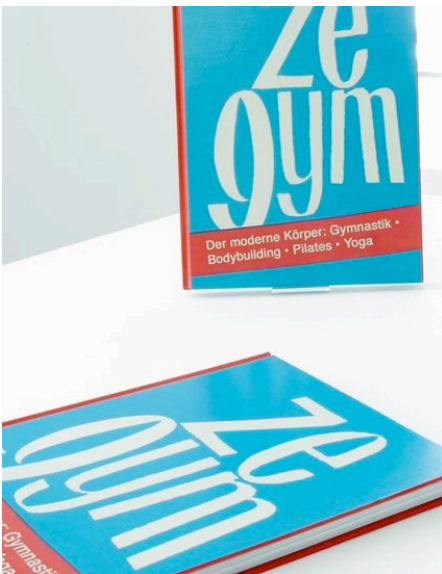
The relations between space and the collective psyche made by Marx is my key to open up for analysis the curators incorporation of Yoga into a discussion of space. This discourse seems to share similarities with Marx's, in the way it also brings to the fore a social malaise present in the decoration debate which could be described as the searching for a 'place' to locate feelings of individual expression, freedom, simplicity and harmony. While following Marx's line of argument and Thoreau's actions, we could also consider what emancipatory or critical power the act of embracing nature or the ideals it has come to symbolise can offer today?

The practice of Yoga is inscribed into the trauma of Marx's 'Machine in the Garden' through a letter Thoreau wrote shortly after his time in Waldon Pond which is in fact one of the first recorded affirmations of a westerner practicing Yoga without travelling to the East.

*Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the yoga gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works.
Depend upon it, that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully[...]The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things.*



Divine forms traverse him without tearing him, and united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animal original matter. To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi.⁵



Having proposed that the origins of a tension between form and form of living can be traced back to the first Industrial Revolution and in essence the machine. I would like to pose that it is no mere coincidence that Yoga made it's appearance in the West at this time and became part of Thoreau's escape. As social conscience became increasingly aware of the conditioning, and controlling mechanisms of the machine (taken in the broadest sense of the word, meaning any mechanised system) the body emerges as a counterforce.

Such a method of antagonism, Thoreau goes on to describe in his essay 'Civil Disobedience' (1849) 'Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine'⁶. However, this is made even more explicit when social disillusionment in the USA turns to direct action. In December 1964, the activist Mario Savio stood on the steps of Sproul Hall to address fellow members of the free speech movement with the following words:

... You've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!⁷

Yoga for Thoreau was a corporeal method to escape the horrors of industrialism and engage with nature. Jesper Nordahl's video *Breakdance* (2004) uses the embodiment of breakdancing in his subject and it's latent history, to puncture a bleak cityscape with notions of resistance and self-expression that draw from groups in the Bonx NYC in the

1970s and the broader countercultural movement which began out of a disillusionment of social constructs and demanded greater individual freedoms and determinacy.

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkie's in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car*

*Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under*⁸

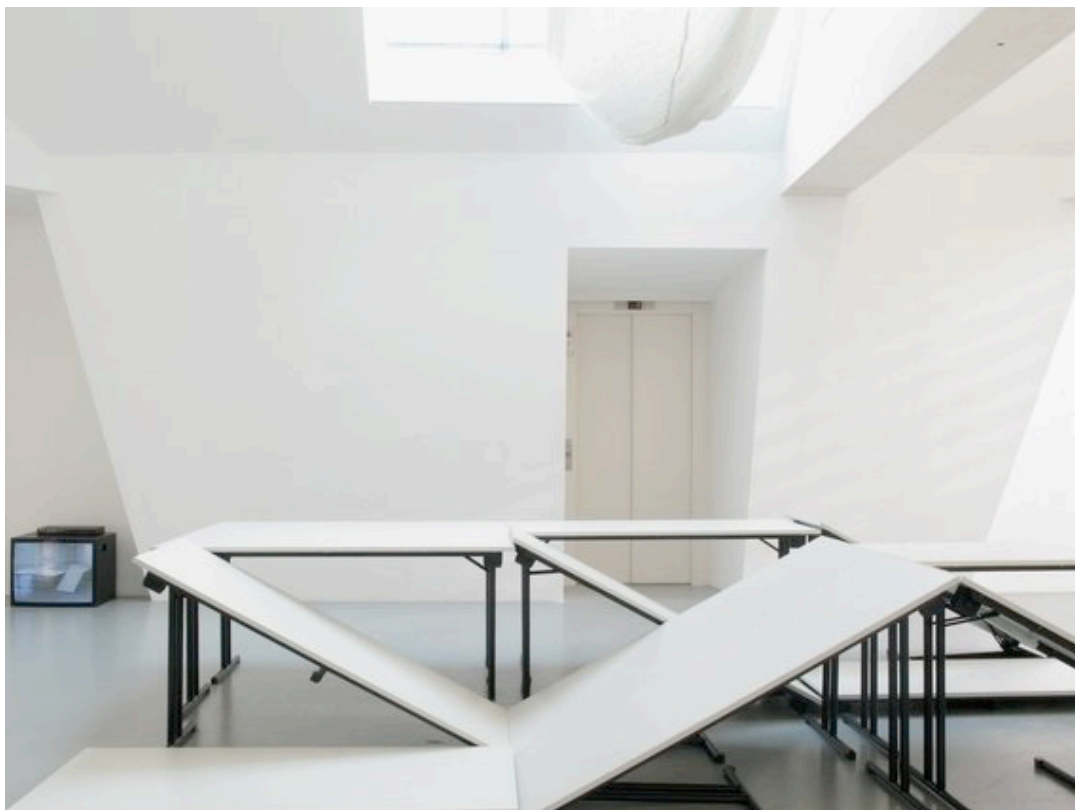
In *Breakdance* optimism and change ultimately fail as the divide between context and body dissolves in the character of the performance itself. The embodiment of a socially progressive dance becomes a parody due to the graceless and clumsy physical movement of the actor which ultimately binds him to the very apparatus (both physical and ideological) that he is trying to depart.

The Twentieth Century brings with it a complex and powerful generator of collective symbols, myths, and desires in the form of the mass media. Michaela Meise's use of seductive, colourful, glossy magazine cuttings in *Ze Gym, der moderne koerper : gymnastik, bodybuilding, pilates, yoga* adopts the medium's power to evoke a credulous manner of looking which in this work makes the subject matter of contemporary trends in exercise and home interiors indistinguishable. Both the home and practices of body-conditioning including Yoga are stripped of any spiritual, interior relevance or connection to identity; the bodies we are shown contorting and straining are just examples of shells every modern man or woman should aspire to achieve.

*Welcome my son, welcome to the machine.
What did you dream?
It's alright we told you what to dream.
You dreamed of a big star,
He played a mean guitar,
He always ate in the Steak Bar.
He loved to drive in his Jaguar.
So welcome to the Machine.*⁹

This reading is also carried through the subject matter itself. Take for example Meise's selection of the photograph of Lina Loo's bedroom designed by her husband Adolf Loos. This fur-lined womb of a room stands as a layer of protection from the difficulties of modern city living but as the critic Beatriz Colomina points out 'The inhabitant is both





covered by the space and detached from it. The tension between sensation of comfort and comfort as control disrupts the role of the house as a traditional form of representation.’¹⁰ Again the body intended to inhabit this space is separated from its true psyche which is disavowed and replaced by Loo’s notion of home. In this work emptiness implies a loss of individual subjectivity and establishes a container waiting to be filled, shaped, manipulated and controlled –as Pink Floyd’s lyrics assert ‘It’s alright we told you what to dream...so welcome to the Machine.’

This ultimate split between body and mind in these works forces us to consider the subtleties within performance and in turn, dance and Yoga; they not only refer to a series of physical movements within a site. Yoga is the pursuit of a spiritual wholeness between body and mind and it is the subjects belief in this, that can evoke a transcendent experience and a differentiation of the subject from the material world.

This signification of Yoga is synonymous with Marx’s ‘garden’ and the rural pastures where his literary protagonists sort their solace and in turn gained the critical perspective on society evidenced in their writing. If this is the case then it follows that it is only through self determined movements and migrations that a subject can find such spiritual-bodily wholeness.

The performers actions of climbing, crawling and weaving in Henning Bohl’s *Untitled*, and the counter movement of the office tables bobbing up and down have a transformative effect. Suddenly the intended purpose and function of these tables has become redundant. The tables cohabit the space with their user. This is emphasised by the sculptural counterpart of the installation which brings a form to the movement that is reminiscent of a seascape and a transcendental experience of nature.

The architect Eileen Gray described this quality of habitation as ‘une organisme vivant’ where in-built movement in architecture and furnishing permitted the function of a space to be defined by its user thus allowing for a new sociality to be possible, ‘Gray’s architecture constructs another kind of person; it is body-building.’¹¹

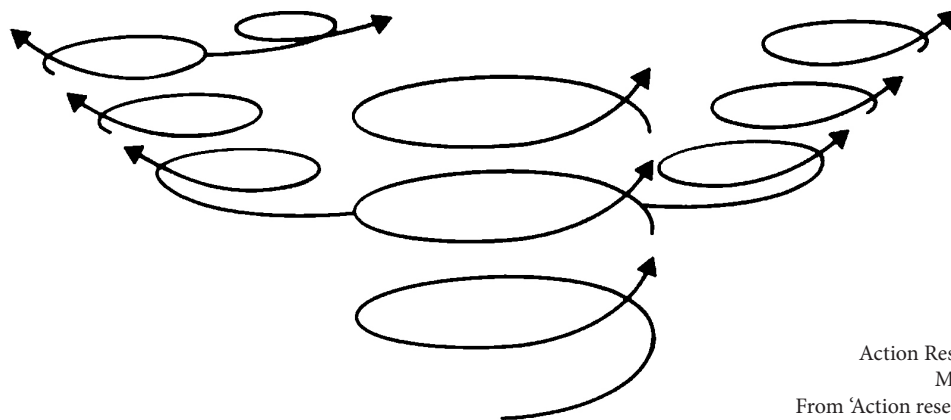
*Design is all about desire, but strangely this desire seems almost subject-less today, or at least lack-less; that is, design seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority – an apotheosis of the subject that is also its potential disappearance.*¹²

Latte Mama’s structural quotations of architecture and home, generates a facade of wholeness which on first reflection could embody Hal Foster’s critic of design. However, the counterpoint in this work as in Bohl’s *Untitled*, is its temporality; a word which incidentally if entered into the thesaurus you find to be a synonym of ‘mortality’ as is ‘being’, ‘flesh’, and ‘humanity’.

The absence of any permanent fixings in the installation – instead elements are simply leant, woven or hung upon one another – curbs the reading of the work, away from Loos’ intimation that over-decoration is like living with your own corpse and towards notions of improvisation, recombination and even complete dissolution within architecture and design which pivots on the subjects interaction; the architecture is alive!

This identification of the potential of materials to be constantly updated and ever-relevant to the needs of its users’ daily life, parallels Walter Benjamin’s fantastic phrase ‘frenetic topicality’ which he used to describe a similar form of living. ‘To dwell’ is a transitive verb – as in the notion of ‘indwelt spaces’; herewith an indication of the frenetic topicality concealed in habitual behaviour. It has to do with fashioning a shell of ourselves.’¹³

Stasis is no longer symbolised by the home *itself*, an ‘organisme vivant’ or ‘indwelt space’ involves a balance between the inhabitant’s shifting identity and an ever-evolving form of ‘home’; both are in constant flux. In this situation ‘To dwell’ becomes an action research where the individuals’ awareness to social change and designs powers of representation are honed [the mind] and to follow the action research



IMAGES:
Action Research Diagram
McNiff, J. (1988).
From ‘Action research: principles
and practice’
London: Routledge.



model, the social effect of this is that common values of home are re-considered [the body in space].

*This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather.*¹⁴

Such a methodology of research is also present in Thoreau's approach whose strategic change of habitation, planned for a temporary length of time, was used dually for self reflection and social change offered through 'Walden'.

By way of a conclusion, we return to Marx's notion of the 'Machine in the Garden' and the themes of 'Provisorisches Yoga' to find the perpetuality of re-negotiations between the body, mind and space that have been identified from the Eighteenth century to today, is in fact the point of criticality when left in the hands of the individual. The role of form in this equation is one of permeability and flexibility so aptly described by Thoreau's 'a picture in outlines' and for me, embodied in the exhibition by Fabrics Interseason's floating fitted sheet above the skylight of the gallery.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Roger Waters song lyrics from *Welcome to the Machine*, Pink Floyd 'Wish You Were Here', 1975
- ² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford University Press, 1964
- ³ *ibid.* p.9
- ⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Pennsylvania State University, 2006 (1854) p.71
- ⁵ Henry David Thoreau in correspondance with Harrison Gray Otis Blake, Concord, November 20 1849. Quoted from *The Familiar Letters of Thoreau* edited by EB.Sanborn, 1894
- ⁶ Henry David Thoreau *Civil Disobedience and other essays* Dover Thift Editions, 1993 (1849), p.8
- ⁷ Mario Savio, Sproul Hall Steps, December 2, 1964
- ⁸ Ed "Duke Bootee" Fletcher and Melle Mel lyrics from *Message*, Grand Master Flash and The Furious Five, 'The Message', Sugerhill Records, 1982
- ⁹ Roger Waters song lyrics from *Welcome to the Machine*, Pink Floyd 'Wish You Were Here', 1975
- ¹⁰ Beatriz Colomina *Privacy and Publicity, Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, MIT Press, 1996, p.269
- ¹¹ Katarina Bonnevier *A queer analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027* in *Negotiating Domesticity*, Ed Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Bayder 2005, p.167
- ¹² Hal Foster *Design and Crime and other diatribes*, pub. Verso 2002 p.18
- ¹³ Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project* Cambridge MA Harvard University Press, 1999, p.221
- ¹⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, 2006 (1854) p.66