

Get Physical  
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If we describe the act of bringing an artwork into the world as a “feat of strength”, we might give rise to the idea that this object blasts open the boundaries of perception; that its polymorphous nature causes it to transcend itself and move into a state of inconceivability. In terms of classical aesthetics, this would be the kind of assertion for which philosopher Immanuel Kant developed his idea of the sublime. Implicitly, it also suggests that this form, this artwork, has been created by a force of genius and stands apart from other handmade items or earthly objects. The producer of the artwork is idealized as a genius for his ability to harness his creativity and conceive of forms that remain beyond the scope of the common man’s imagination. This notion of aesthetics might now seem antiquated; Nonetheless, it has enjoyed a revival in recent years along with other concepts, most of them expressed in economic terms. In the 1950s, the idea of the genius creator was replaced by a more democratic term, “creativity”. In recent years, a variety of societal aestheticization processes have taken place in its name that reflect the conception, and role, of art. The cultural and societal processes of transformation that can be read into Jennifer Bennett’s works allow conclusions to be drawn about the way art is currently organized. Her works present complex narratives, and, to understand them, it is worth taking a look at pop culture.

The new image of work

In 1981, singer Olivia Newton-John released an album titled *Physical*. Until then, she was known in the USA for innocuous country-pop ditties, and *Physical* helped her to achieve international success. At the end of the 1970s, as Newton-John’s career was threatening to stagnate, she and her management decided to create a new image. Music videos were produced to accompany several tracks on the album and then broadcast on MTV, whose launch in the same year was financed by Warner Bros. and American Express. Newton-John enjoyed particular commercial success with *Physical*—a flawless pop song which, with its steady bassline, allowed her voice to reach its fullest potential. The lyrics come across as trite and sexually suggestive—a provocative attempt to win fans in the mainstream. What was, and remains, interesting is the visual representation of the song. Appearing in the video as an aerobics instructor, Newton-John alternates between caressing bodybuilders and teasing corpulent men on fitness machines. On the face of it, this might all seem rather trivial, but the song was released during a period marked by political and economic upheaval. Economic liberalization meant that Western economic systems were being reformed, labor unions stripped of their power, state property privatized and broad-ranging economic deregulation implemented. Unsurprisingly, the steelworker—whose self-image was defined by heavy factory work—was not a fitting mascot for this restructured society. Workers’ bodies were no longer being hardened in mines or at steel furnaces: Their arms and torsos now attained their shape on exercise machines in fitness centers. On closer inspection, Jennifer Bennett’s sculpture, *Kraftakt* (“Feat of Strength”), which is composed of curved steel pipes, resembles an exercise machine. The sculpture provides an excellent basis for debate about what the restructuring of the workforce means and the way in which it has reinforced aestheticization processes in society.

The return of the New

At the beginning of the 1990s, economist Richard Florida formulated his controversial theory of the Creative Class. He described a post-Fordist workforce that could no longer distinguish itself through heavy industry, but had to use

constant innovation management to offset the loss of manual work in a context of global competition. At the heart of Florida's idea was a "new" class of people who represented society's economic potential: academics, designers and artists – in short, people with "creative" occupations or biographies. In a comprehensive study, sociologist Andreas Reckwitz analyzes the circumstances and cultural upheavals that enabled creativity to become a significant part of the economy. In doing so, he draws on Michel Foucault's idea of the *dispositif*.<sup>1</sup> Reckwitz argues that, in his creativity *dispositif*—formed from the intertwinement of discourses, working conditions, social structures and power arrangements—current societal conditions become apparent. Artists, he concludes, are the original producers of the New and reinforce the creativity myth. By fulfilling this cultural function, they meet society's expectations. He divides the New—which, ever since the avant-garde movements, represents a catalyst for cultural production – into three categories, only one of which is fixed in the present day.

The New, as it exists in the present, is characterized particularly by its being based on a regime that underpins the past and the future; that, from an objective point of view, differentiates the Other from the Same and, socially, calls for deviation from the normal and from normative expectations. "Here, creativity always denotes an expectation structure in which you can fail. It therefore fits seamlessly into the comprehensive catalogue of demands with which the modern subject must comply—the only difference being that this demand is even more incalculable, dependent as it is on the 'moods' of the audience."<sup>2</sup>

The imperative of the cultural economy

The demand for the New, symptomatic of the hype regime, becomes particularly apparent in the art market. Since the ideologically bipolar world order collapsed in 1989, it has revealed itself to be a seemingly inexhaustible source of symbolic capital, constantly yielding new artists and art. In 1970, three art fairs (Cologne, Basel and Brussels) saw themselves purely as trade fairs. In 1990, there were 14. By 2011, the figure stood at 189. The globalized art market survived the subprime crisis and subsequent recession thanks to global expansion, specifically the development of new markets in the so-called BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India and China).<sup>3</sup> The spread of art fairs and auctions was made possible only by changes to tax laws that allowed collectors to own artworks taxfree on the condition that they were put on display for the public. These legal changes occurred at precisely the same time as the aforementioned societal transformation—that is, at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> The wave of Young British Artists, for example, would have been unthinkable without their wealthy champion, the art collector Charles Saatchi. In the 1990s, he strategically deployed his capital and networks of contacts to organize blockbuster exhibitions that had a spectacular media impact and continue to bolster the reputation of British art today. Even in the media coverage generated by state-funded prizes such as the Turner Prize, presented by the Tate Gallery since the 1980s, contemporary art is presented as a vehicle for longing and bourgeois, escapist fantasies. The hype regime, which has spread through a broad array of media, obscures the true precariousness of most artists' working conditions.

Another "creative" archetype is currently on the ascent and can be understood as a shape-shifting reference: the hipster. An ironic figure in a collage of clothing, the hipster floats between the present and future. His manner draws on the idea of the sassy young artist; With an old camera in one hand, he moves through the streets of urban zones now gentrified and freed of criminal elements. Nevertheless, this figure is more a victim than a perpetrator. A cultural assemblage, he must devote himself to self-optimization, spreading the creative atmosphere, following the laws of the blog and combining aesthetic attractions in new ways in order to draw attention to himself.<sup>5</sup> This broadcasting of aesthetic attractions avoids transgression; Otherwise, the identification within the expectation structure could fail. In this sense, the hipster phenomenon is the culmination of increased economic pressure that demands that

everything we do has added creative value without actually being a creative act. For hipsters, creativity is merely a blueprint. This dependence on creativity doesn't produce anything creative; It is more akin to a style whose goal is selfmanagement.

#### Sidestepping codified semantics

By unmasking them, Jennifer Bennett's body of work subverts the structures of expectation that have been constructed in recent years and are linked to the production of the New and the creativity dispositive. The sculpture *Kraftakt* ("Feat of Strength") reduces arrays of questions to a presentation in which the audience is asked to make an assumption—one that they cannot, however, base on a foundation of reliable semantics. Her works should be interpreted as a collection. For example, over an extended period of time, she used a cellphone camera to gather pictures of extracts from books that represent a kind of cognitive landscape of her artistic identity. In *Books*, however, the audience is once again confronted with questions, and it is not clear which conclusions can be drawn from the solitary, scattered pages. The arbitrary selection of the pages displayed nonetheless allows us to develop a speculative interpretation based on interconnected pieces of knowledge, and to link other objects in the exhibition with this subtext. One such object is a screen door composed of strips of plastic, although it is not entirely clear whether this is a work in itself or part of the exhibition design. It is the kind of door normally used to create a clean division between fields of activity, thus preventing the cross-contamination of substances used in different situations. In the exhibition, the plastic strips are freed from their original purpose and so evoke only the transition between two distinct areas of work or parts of a factory. In this way, the artist addresses a threshold situation in perception that stands at the beginning of every sensory activity and forms the basis of knowledge. However, these plastic strips can also be seen as a divide between what the artist is trying to express and what the viewer is able to discern in an object. In this way, Jennifer Bennett's works live from connotations of, and potential methods for, organizing and presenting knowledge. This knowledge also spills over into the exterior space.

Last summer, the artist donned a clown costume and walked the streets of Venice, painting white dots on the ground. Through this completely purposeless act, founded on the primacy of pointlessness, Jennifer Bennett uses the masquerade of a clown to engage with ideas of social exaggeration and the distortion of the familiar through a standardized and socially accepted form—one that inverts the everyday world to conjure something out of reality that already existed but was not perceived. In the case of a carnival, for example, social positions are reversed. In this way, the artist uses her art to slip into intermediate spaces that open up possibilities and generate a moment of ambiguity.

This is also made clear by a series of sculptures that consist of panels braced against the wall by an apparently fragile ceramic rod. They could collapse at any moment; The art could, quite literally, implode. In this way, we can posit that Bennett's works do not exist in fixed arrangements of materials, but rather in a constellation resembling a Mobius loop, namely, with a front and a back, but no orientation or fixed perspective.

#### Downgrading as an emancipation strategy

The identification of processes of definition and their translation into art: This is the source of Bennett's engagement with music. She regularly performs with her band. The arrangements of the pieces exhibit an interest in harmony, but subvert this with imprecise play, implying a deliberate rejection of professionalization. Bennett's aim is not to subvert listening habits, but rather to develop a form that at once codifies and does not codify itself. It does not concern a specialization in a particular field, but rather a conscious decision to question these tendencies towards specialization and to generate contradictions. It aims to reference an everyday aesthetic but not to overinflate its importance, configure it anew or fall into a new "genius mode", instead perceiving the everyday as an art form in which self-determination is a central point of reference. Taking

this route also means uniting work and everyday life in an aesthetic practice that results in an attitude, rather than a style. To do so would mean turning away from the current creativity dispositif and towards the political: a development towards not recoiling at the thought of leading a discourse on values, engaging with themes such as the capitalization of the social and the symbolic and, in doing so, encouraging art to be a forum for diverse processes of negotiation. This would mean a complete renunciation of the return of the New, a turnaround that would replace the reflexive satisfaction of the recently-constructed expectation structure—that of the creativity dispositif—with a demand for an open mind.

1) Reckwitz, Andreas: *Die Erfindung der Kreativität. Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1995, Berlin 2012.

2) Ibid, p. 358 f.

3) Baia Curioni, Stefan: *A Fairy Tale: The Art System, Globalization, and the Fair Movement*, in: Lind, Maria und Velthuis, Olav (eds.): *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets. A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2012.

4) See also Ehresmann, Nina: *Paint misbehaving': Neoexpressionismus und die Rezeption und Produktion figurativer, expressiver Malerei in New York zwischen 1977 und 1984*, Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2006.

5) Greif, Mark; Ross, Kathleen; Tortorici, Dayana (eds): *What was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, n+1 Foundation, New York 2010.

*Translation Matthew Way*