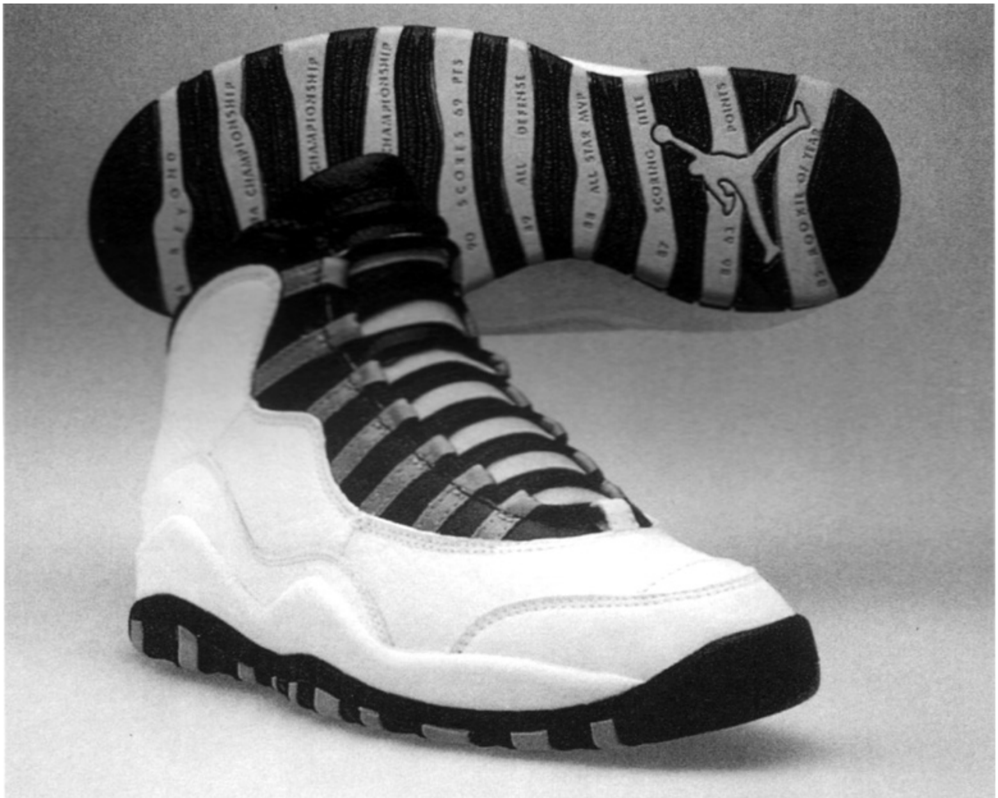
CHAMPIONSHIP
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90 SCORES 69 PTS
89 ALL DEFENSE
88 ALL STAR MVP
87 SCORING TITLE
86 63 POINTS
85 ROOKIE OF YEAR

AIR JORDAN BASKETBALL SHOES

Remember Neo-Geo? Haim Steinbach's shelf units, Jeff Koons's basketballs, Ashley Bickerton's tech-fetishes? Remember Hal Foster and how the "Damaged Goods" show claimed to confuse and challenge the boundaries separating high art from mass production, museum installation from commodity display? Now, a decade later, Neo-Geo's retrenchment to high art systems and values is taken as evidence of the movement's conceptual skid, a skid greased, perhaps, by the trackless art market and the work's own accelerated shelf life. I would argue that Neo-Geo did not fail so much as it was out-hustled, out-innovated, and outclassed by the arena it claimed to have entered: the real world of consumer product design, innovation, marketing, and display.

A case in point is the ten-year retrospective of Air Jordan basketball shoes at Niketown, a five-story museum and retail store that was Chicago's most visited institution last year. Why run all over town to the Shedd aquarium, the Art Institute, or the museums of science and natural history when Niketown offers cultural artifacts, innovative technology, and live fish? Better still, after learning all about Bo Jackson's shoes or Andre Agassi's shorts, you can walk into the next room and buy them —not postcards, not replicas, but the things themselves.

Nike Inc.'s masterpiece is the Air Jordan line of basketball shoes, products that have maintained an indifference to social reality that almost qualifies them as art. They were the first basketball shoes to retail for more than $100; the first to have a role in a major motion picture (Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*); and the first that people literally killed for.

In Niketown a special room is dedicated to Michael "Air" Jordan and these shoes. A Memphis-style display case holds ten Plexiglas sarcophagi, each containing an autographed pair of Air Jordans actually worn by the man himself. A basketball goal hangs at regulation height from the ceiling, and the floor is actual basketball court hardwood. A 28' photomural of Jordan in full regalia looms above. The sound of cheering fans cycles on and off every ten minutes —long enough for a sales clerk to ask if I need any help. (I'm considering spending $130 on a pair of Air Jordan 10s —not to wear, to store away. NIKE has informed me that early-model Air Jordans are going for $1,200 in Japan.) The crowd roars. The cash register rings. Another artifact sold.

Tinker Hatfield has designed Air Jordans since their inception in 1985, but Jordan has been involved from the beginning. As the story goes, it was Jordan and his agent who pitched the concept of the shoe to Nike. Meeting regularly with Hatfield, Nike's public relations staff, and product engineers, Jordan gives performance feedback and makes aesthetic suggestions. (Could it have been Jordan's influence that led to the dropping of the Nike logo from the shoe, in favor of the AJ mark alone?) Of all the shoes, AJ 5 and 6 are the ultimate combinations of Hatfield innovation and Jordan intellect. Although AJ 5 returned to the idea of structurally compartmentalizing the upper, this regression is counteracted

by an ostentatious display of synthetic materials, aerospace lacing, and a "see-through" heel — a running shoe innovation that is the benchmark of Nike technology. The idea of being able to see through a shoe's most critical performance area exalted the shoe's technology at the same time as revealing its signature ingredient: air. The see-through sole fused the key innovation, material, and namesake of Air Jordans into one brilliant functional pun: we already knew who Air was, now we could see what air did. AJ 6 took this levity and playfully grounded it in brawny, earth-bound muscle.

The AJ 6 profile is reminiscent of early Jaguars and Porsches in that all its shapes are inverted and downward flowing, more about using gravity and traction than escaping from them. The look of speed has been sacrificed for the feel of power; surface flash has been discarded like a t-shirt from the Incredible Hulk. Strangest of all is a low-slung heel and ankle panel that looks like an inverted pigeon wing, and a heavy looking all-black sole with roadster flames spurting backwards from its mid-section.

By June of 1993, Michael Jordan had won two Olympic gold medals, three Most Valuable Player awards, seven consecutive league scoring titles, two Defensive Player of the Year awards, and nine consecutive All-Star game appearances. In addition, his team, the Chicago Bulls, had won three consecutive championships. But then came "the troubled shoe," Air Jordan 9. Rendered in black and gray Nu-Buck with a sickly, multi-colored tongue, it looks more like a hiking boot than a basketball shoe.

The breathing holes in the uppers are scarce compared to previous models, and the see-through sole has been sealed up, entombed. The shoe looks tough, moody, impenetrable, and is the only model to have a polypropylene finger loop stitched to the heel for greater ease in pulling them on. Jordan never had to worry about pulling them on, though, as he retired from professional basketball just one week before the scheduled start of the regular season.

It's conceivable that being the most influential figure for Nike's deleterious sociology played a part in Jordan's decision to retire. Nike Inc. has been rightly criticized for baiting a generation of predominantly black youths with the proposition that basketball is a way out of the inner city, but in the end Michael Jordan was the casualty of the socio-economic crossfire. While his Gatorade endorsements encouraged kids to "Be Like Mike," his Nike ads averred that "It's Gotta Be The Shoes," which adds up to: be like Mike, but Mike's the way he is because of the shoes he wears, so that'll be $130, please. Every time he made an incredible basket, he sold another 1,000 pairs of shoes. At some point, perhaps, Jordan's athletic skill and commercial manipulation became too indistinguishable, mutually incompatible, or just plain out of control.

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THE LUMIÈRE BROTHERS CINEMA

On cue, a mustached man carefully opens the double doors of a factory in Lyon, France. The factory's employees — mostly women in wide skirts and elaborate hats, but also men in dark, full-length aprons and several riding bicycles — pour into the sunlight and disperse to the right and left, their shadows trailing under them at what appears to be midday. A rambunctious dog topples the first cyclist, and several of the men gaze furtively in our direction as they come out, before lowering their heads and moving on. The next bicycles are better choreographed: half-way into the action a front tire noses out of a smaller door on the left and hangs there for several seconds until two more bicycles appear in the double doorway. Then, like jets in formation, the first cyclist veers left, the second comes straight out, and the third follows before turning right. As the last few people file out, one more cyclist appears, wobbles for a second in the bright sun, and pedals off. The man who opened the double doors begins to close them again but he flickers, falters, can't. Auguste and Louis Lumière, entrepreneurs and the sons of a wealthy photo-materials manufacturer, are out of film.

So goes *La sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*), the first film by the brothers Lumière, made 110 years ago last March. Shot with a "cinématographe," the sixteen-pound, hand-cranked wooden box from which all of cinema derives its name, *La sortie* and the machine that made it are fundamentally no different from the cameras and projectors used for *Batman Forever* or *Waterworld*. What is cinema but a string of transparent photographs spooled across an illuminated bicycle? This is the kind of simplicity that the Lumières loved (and Hollywood would like to forget), a charm that increased considerably when they took their apparatus home.

There, with the help of family and friends, the limitations of the cinématographe were more than offset by what John Grierson has described as a "fine careless rapture." How fascinated we can be with a new machine! Everything seems different through it, and the Lumières — like us — filmed everything: the cat eating lunch, the baby walking, snowball fights, garden hose pranks, sack races, baby parades, the destruction of a wall. From the beginning, the most mundane activity was made to shimmer in the luminosity of their clear, silent material. For example, in *La bataille de neige*, friends and family members have been set up on opposing sides of a road to begin a furious snowball fight. In their haste to perform they sometimes fail to pack their projectiles properly, and end up hurling what look like disintegrating comets and gossamers. When they do hit their dark targets the snowballs explode like white stars. At one point the obligatory cyclist enters the fray and is pelted to the ground by both sides, before gathering his equipment and getting away.

Bolstered by the success of their invention at home in Lyon and foreseeing its great, albeit short-lived market potential (the brothers thought the cinématographe would be a fad, and against the protestation of their many later admirers, insisted that they were always businessmen and never artists), the Lumières went abroad. Filming people who

were neither friends nor employees, however, proved a much more beguiling task. Apparently the cinématographe was as curious to look at in operation as it was immobile, and most of the Lumières' attempts at documenting everyday street life ended up recording their machine's extraordinary public reception. In response, Auguste and Louis developed a film director's two most useful skills: martial discipline and flattery. The Lumières spent a lot of energy getting their subjects to cooperate, to do what they would "normally do" rather than what they usually did, which was either to stare at the giant coffee mill being aimed at them or politely get out of the way. Neither reaction was satisfactory, so the Lumières steered people into *Londres, l'entrée du cinématographe*, steered them out of *Dublin, l'incendie*, or simply filmed the void caused by the camera itself, as in *Moscow, le promenade*.

The invention of the 20th century's dominant art form aside, the most ingenious aspect of the first cinématographe was that it functioned as camera, developer, and projector all in one, allowing the Lumières to make films as far away as Tokyo or Chicago and screen them in the same city days later. The device was so well-received at its debut in New York City that Felix Mesguich, the projectionist at the screening who had come on the Lumières' behalf, was brought onstage afterwards amidst a standing ovation while the orchestra played the French national anthem!

Originally intended to depict employees leaving work, *La sortie* also documents the workers at the Lumière factory entering their leisure time, a relatively new spatial concept in the spring of 1895. Inadvertently, then, the film captures them entering the arena of their lives in which film will become *the* most powerful influence. Thus, *La sortie* foreshadows the availability of cinema's future consumers whilst acknowledging the midwives of its birth. 100 years later, the film functions as a kind of work/leisure conundrum for the 20th century, a tight emblem for the production/consumption spiral that threatens both to kill its parents and eat its young. A century on, bored with our machines and fed-up with the social contract, with Newt Gingrich the most powerful man in America and Quentin Tarantino topping the charts, it appears the killing and eating will soon begin.

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AIR CANADA
7 ELEVEN
FOX TRAX
82 MPH

FOX SPORTS IMAGING TECHNOLOGY

Ice hockey is a cruel game. Unlike other international sports involving a projectile of some sort, at no point in a hockey game are you guaranteed possession of the projectile. After every goal in soccer, touchdown in football, or basket in basketball, the rules stipulate that the other side gets a chance to do something with the ball. In tennis, volleyball, and other net and racket sports, this even-handedness actually mandates that it is only after you have delivered the ball to your opponent, and it is clear that no response is forthcoming, that you are deemed to have scored. Even baseball — whose disregard for time and scoring limits allows that every game has the possibility of going on forever — is nonetheless structured around alternating possessions regulated by a set number of innings and outs. Change of possession is the fundamental punctuation of most major sports, providing each with its sense of drama as well as demonstrating its particular concept of fairness.

In hockey, however, the puck is brought back out to center ice after every score for a free drop between two players, one from each opposing team: the face-off. In theory, if a hockey team had an indomitable face-off artist, errorless puck handlers, and an expert scorer, they could play an entire game within the rules of the sport without their opponents ever touching the puck, save for the goaltender fishing each goal out of his net. (And he isn't even required to do that, although he usually does.) No other sport that I know of allows for such utter dominance and frustration.

And if this frustration is the reason why there are so many fights in ice hockey, then it is also the root of why the game is not popular from a purely visual standpoint. Fringe observers and media experts have said for years that hockey is as frustrating to watch as it is to play, that it suffers from erratic and irregular "possessions" of an object that is either too small or moving too fast to be seen. This is certainly true if you're concerned with following the puck — a black, solid rubber disc measuring about three inches in diameter that frequently approaches speeds of ninety miles per hour — but this obsession with the ball, endemic to televised sports, is not so relevant in hockey. Hockey players may be the only professional athletes who will admit that often even they don't know where the puck is. They'll also tell you that this confusion is part of hockey, something to be seized and made use of. I'm not much of a hockey fan, but I've always liked this aspect of the game, the thrill of momentary loss of content, of possession, of vision. You see these people racing around and yet you can't see the point of it all, the object of their desire, the puck.

To be a fan or player of hockey you have to develop an absurdist's resolve, acquire the ability to continue watching or skating even when the objective is unclear. In such moments your only recourse is to scan the ice and figure the common vector of all of the player's gazes, dabble in Cluster Theory and analysis, or as a shortcut, check the goalies. A goalie's posture will always tell you where the puck is, and if it doesn't, then he is about to be scored upon. Either way the game's objective will be made clear.

Unfortunately, American television networks haven't been interested in televising such non-productive ambiguity since they stopped broadcasting hockey in the early 1970s. Such programming tends to make viewers uncomfortable with their sets, gets them thinking about how they might spend their free time better, what's for dinner, when they will die. National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman blew the issue wide open recently when he revealed that the reason hockey hasn't worked on television is that the dot matrix that comprises a video image is absolutely incapable of depicting a puck that is moving at more than seventy miles per hour — which happens about fifty times a game. As he described it, the puck virtually disintegrates within the system, like an image halftoned into oblivion or a meteor entering our atmosphere. This was a disheartening realization for viewers who expect a lot from their television sets, not to mention the powers that be who need them to believe in the medium's omniscience.

Enter Fox Sports, the new network provider of professional hockey, who does not share my enthusiasm for formlessness and ambiguity. With the commencement of the NHL playoffs Fox will unleash a video imaging technology known as FoxTrax, which promises to eliminate the anxiety of watching hockey on television. The system works by first embedding twenty miniature, high impact, infrared-emitting diodes around the circumference and the top and bottom of the puck. Second, an impermeable surveillance grid of infrared sensors is installed on the walls and overhead structures surrounding the ice rink, the information from which is linked via computers to the video output of the game. When the new "cyberpuck" is put into play, its exact location is tracked out on television screens by a surrounding blue aura, an aura that penetrates players, goalie pads or the near boards like the you are here indicator on a subway map. Whenever the puck exceeds seventy miles per hour in the course of the game, the computer automatically converts to a red comet tail indicating its speed and direction. When the puck drops back below seventy miles per hour — reintegrates, so to speak — the blue halo returns. Thus there is not a single moment in the life of the puck that goes unmonitored, not even when it is hidden or disintegrates. Its only escape is to leave the playing surface altogether.

Having broadcast the system as a trial run during the NHL All-Star Game, Fox Sports tells me that it received an enormously favorable response. I believe them. In a country where seven-year-olds routinely wave at bank security cameras, where prisoners are detained by electronically monitored bracelets, where you can dial a 900 number to find out if any convicted sex offenders have moved into your neighborhood, where a detailed computer image of your building is readily available on the target screen of every jet fighter in the military (and isn't that great) — always being able to know the location of the puck is a disturbingly trivial thought. Americans love being monitored, and they rely on their television sets to fulfill that task more than any other component of their lives. Whether appearing on talk or home-video shows, or filling out Neilson Ratings forms, people believe — have seen proof — that they are integral to television's existence, not only by sitting home and watching but also by providing it with content.

Before FoxTrax, the loss of the puck in televised hockey revealed a fatal flaw in the medium's coverage that threatened to undermine the confidence of viewers, implying that there were still people and things in the world capable of moving through the system without a trace. The dazzling inanity of computer technology has staved off pangs of insecurity and death, at the same time annihilating the more subtle and admirable aspects of a minor competitive sport.

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The three objects of this Bulletin were originally part of a larger set of lessons, originally written for different magazines, then collected into a two-part book under a single title: Joe Scanlan, *Object Lessons* (Ostende / New York: Mu.ZEE / Dexter Sinister, 2012).