

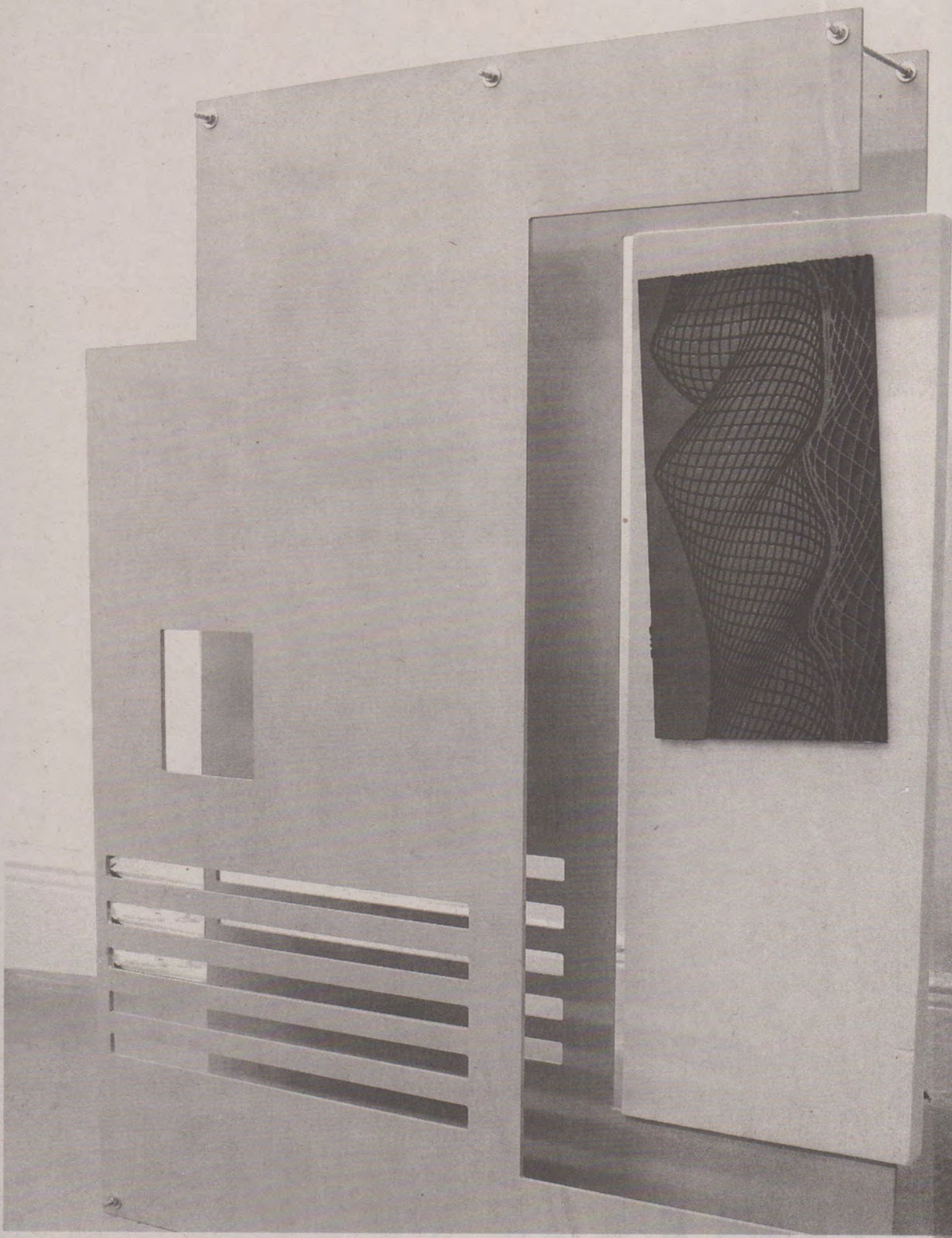
AESTHETICS & ANAESTHETICS

# AESTHETICS & ANAESTHETICS

Olivia Erlanger in the ashes of economic collapse

*Text by Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal*







"EVERY GREAT WORK OF ART GOES THROUGH MESSY phases while it is in transition. A lump of clay can become a sculpture. Blobs of paint become paintings which inspire."<sup>1</sup> This is what American General William Caldwell told reporters in November 2006 from Iraq's fortified Green Zone, on a day in which fifty civilians were killed. Modern aesthetics is political anaesthesia.

Bypassing the regalia of Truth and Beauty, Susan Buck-Morss re-joins aesthetics to the anarchy of sensory experience, and, crucially, to its becoming numb. "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life," Walter Benjamin warned. How? The State doesn't redistribute power, but lets its subjects "express themselves."<sup>2</sup> With sculptures and wall works that exploit customization, wearables, proprietary currency, Olivia Erlanger explores the ways in which capitalism takes up aesthetic expression as a productive but ultimately anaesthetizing power, keeping us in our place.

Perhaps it's fitting, then, that Olivia and I should meet in monochrome. I was in all white, she in all black, and we sat down in an innocuous Lower East Side cafe to chat about her current explorations of economic collapse, our shared anxieties about emotional labor, and all the ways her work is wringing the cloud. Perhaps it's also fitting that we chose not to record, and had to re-create the highlights.

**TRACY JEANNE ROSENTHAL:** I'm interested in the ways your work speaks to the actual materiality of circulation—or perhaps those places where abstraction gets visceral. Besides guarded server farms, cables, contemporary materialists have also pointed to our very bodies, the places where emotions live inside us. How is your work dealing with this theme?

**OLIVIA ERLANGER:** The transformation of information from a static format into a tangible interface happened so fast. We awoke in the midst of cyclical crises. Perceived global turmoil isn't unique to this moment or my generation, but the modes through which we experience it are unprecedented in their intensity. The collapse of the markets in 2008 and 2009, the instability that followed... delirium. My objects index a shared societal disillusionment. If they are bodies, their blood is disembodiment.

How do your physical materials (e.g. aluminum, pressed foam) and processes (etching, resin pouring) resonate with some of your conceptual concerns? We live in a world of synthetic replications and cheap imitations. In many ways the imitations are becoming more important. Material has come to take on a symbolic meaning that is far richer than its base components. One's sense of reality can no

longer be reliably verified by what we can see or touch. What determines the "realness" of something is how much we believe in it and this belief in turn outlines our sense of value.

In my project *Material Studies II - A House Falls Apart*, I considered one material: marble. Marble tile used in home decor is often a synthetic, or a vinyl print used to suggest antiquity and luxury. I love to point out the fake, the counterfeit. The objects for *Material Studies - A House Falls Apart*—stacks of foam that are faux marble, cast resin hands touching one another through gloves, a marble fruit bowl sliding apart filled with Soft-soap, and two porcelain luster-glazed hand holds and white gold fingertips—all addressed the ideas of illusion, belief, and value.

In *Wigwam and the Possibility of Never Waking*, I was specifically exploring "techno-alienation". Franco Berardi uses this term to refer more directly to what happens in the work force, but it applies to my wider concerns with the kinds of isolations we experience living within the confines of an integrated grid. In *Wigwam* I addressed this idea with a series of wall works constructed out of solid anodized aluminum. The popularity of this material is endemic of a need for physical presence, even in our immaterial experiences. The aluminum is a visceral, but comforting solid, giving weight to something that would otherwise have none. I routed symbols that are a mix of references to New Age culture and current trends in customization marketing. I was concerned with representing New Age ideology and its promise of centeredness and holistic well-being as a way to promote higher productivity in an overworked, stressed labor force.

Can you tell me about your use of currency, specifically those design features that make currency itself proprietary? Currency seems a prime metonym for dealing with circulation, faith, and failure, even with the speculative valuation of art.

I am interested in currency designs insofar as they relate to the illusion of security. The design features of currency, such as singular, one-of-a-kind, high-security patterns, are not at all individual, or secure. The patterns are supposed to generate from different algorithms but in fact they are just guilloche patterns, which have been used on everything from fine china to Fabergé eggs for hundreds of years. What is being touted as new technology is, in fact, analog.

In recent graphite works, I have taken high-security guilloche patterns sent to me from Smith & Ouzman, a bespoke currency printer, and routed them into sheets of solid graphite. I had been creating custom certificates of authenticity that authenticate themselves and was sent an open PDF of their seven custom high-security designs.



Immediately this seemed oxymoronic and absurd.

The ownership of security and security solutions is what most industries predicate themselves on. Every deal and agreement is simply a matter of trust. In many ways art is, or was, considered antithetical to currency. Now we've seen that value is based on belief and the mass or-

## "WHAT DETERMINES THE REALNESS OF SOMETHING IS HOW MUCH WE BELIEVE IN IT."

ganization of belief. If we get a few key players to all share the same belief, to act accordingly, value is generated. Art as product has become privatized, financialized; object circulation is the new Ponzi scheme. Art, as everyone loves to remind one another, is the last unregulated market.

You've developed a vocabulary in sculpture for constructing constellations or compartmentalizations, which you call dissonances. What drew you to this mode? What does it permit?

New sculptures I am working on look at compartmentalization as a coping mechanism for living on the verge of societal and financial collapse. *Forbes* and *Risky Business* claim that compartmentalization is a route to successful entrepreneurship. Over-compartmentalizing results in something psychologists refer to as dissonance, a sort of rubbing together of opposing forces within oneself. There is an implicit threat in the language of dissonance, an oncoming implosion or the clash of opposing forces.

Does this friction lend itself to emotional collapse or implosion? What does the rubble look like afterwards?

How does your repeated use of wearables (platform shoes, collars, hats, sweatshirts) function within this vocabulary?

Wearables are an immediate reflection of conspicuous consumption. People like to be defined and identified by their things. We are stuff, amalgamations of the objects we amass. I like to make

sculptures out of wearables as they are our most intimate things. Hanging off our skin, between our folds, under our feet or covering our eyes.

In a gallery space where so much of the ritualized experience is absurdly austere and removed from any kind of personal experience, including a pair of shoes, for example, can add intimacy or a sense of familiarity. The wearables sculptures are becoming more and more impossible to wear, more abstract from a legible object.

Can you trace the trajectory of your work from dealing explicitly with the Internet to thinking more broadly about networked capitalism? How does the circulation of digital images fit into this trajectory?

I think that the Internet is the perfect place to start when thinking of capitalism. Net neutrality, surveillance, censorship, data mining.

Image circulation is a new form of capital. As digital natives this is something that my peers and I capitalized on, early on, by conforming to certain standards of documentation. When I was first defining my practice, my personal interaction with art was limited to viewing it online. I replicated the styles of documentation I saw on different websites. There are editing tactics that enhance images of objects. For instance in many online stores, the background of the image is removed, creating a floating object that exists in an expanded digital environment.

Now that viewing objects in this expanded digital environment has become a norm and my personal experience and interaction as both audience and artist is more direct, it feels important to oppose this. It seems rarer to find documentation that is less finessed and directed towards promoting product. Through a combination of making site-specific work, as well as running a project space, Grand Century, I've come to relish documentation that feels personal and intimate. I've come to see and believe in the failure of digital reproductions of art.

How do you feel about the future?

I am excited about possibilities in bending space-time, new drug compounds, and virtual realities. I am hopeful we can stave off the impending desiccation of the earth and resolve the global warming crisis. I'm looking forward to sending my nieces and nephews off to boarding school on Mars.

{1} As reported by Julian Borger in "Iraq a 'Work of Art in Progress' Says US General" *The Guardian* 2 Nov. 2006.

{2} A brutally speedy summary of Susan Buck-Morss's fantastic "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October*, Vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992): 3-41.

Above:  
OLIVIA  
ERLANGER  
*Split Dissonance - Diagonal Spread*, 2014,  
Sandblasted  
aluminum,  
routed  
graphite,  
HDU foam,  
hardware, 48  
× 33 × 9 in.;  
courtesy of  
Greene Exhibitions, Los  
Angeles.