

OLIVIA ERLANGER

BY CLÉMENT DELÉPINE



In 1972, the English novelist J.G. Ballard journeyed through Germany. Driving an old Mercedes along the Rhine River, he explored the suburbs which started sprouting up shortly after the war ended. Passing the opulent houses and the cars bought to match, the motor-boats sitting on their trailers, Ballard couldn't help but notice the obsessive cleanliness of these areas. Not a cigarette butt to be found on the sidewalk. It was as if a leaf falling from a tree might have been too much of a nuisance.

Fascinated by this world under control, where happiness seemed to be replicable and consumerism limitless, he imagined the future as a suburb of Düsseldorf.

Born in New York in 1990, the American artist Olivia Erlanger partially grew up in suburbia. Her memories are tainted with feelings of alienation and isolation in an area where the lack of culture was only matched by the lack of people. Her work investigates how the different patterns of collapse in economics or ecology systemically influenced the recent fracturing of middle class identity.

In the context of her 2015 exhibition *Dog Beneath the Skin*, at Balice Hertling's project space in New York, Erlanger installed a full-size garage door in the gallery space. Facing the entrance, the work appeared like a portal to an intimate dimension, reminiscent of Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, a series of photos documenting serial houses in New Jersey and Staten Island, that examined the permeable frontier separating the private from the public.

Titled *Palimpsest*, evoking something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form, this work questioned whether the garage attached to suburban houses could function as a place producing discourse and

identity. Beyond its primary function, Erlanger identifies the garage as a territory where one can potentially express his or her idiosyncrasy by rehearsing with a punk band, playing video games, maybe running a gallery, or inventing the computer.

In fact, in the past two decades, Silicon Valley, start-up culture, and MTV have consecrated the garage as the true birthplace of American genius.

A common friend, knowing their shared interest for urban problematics and the avatars of domesticity, sent a photograph of *Palimpsest* to the architect Luis Ortega Govela and encouraged him and Erlanger to exchange ideas. This dialogue led them to co-write *Hate Suburbia: The Conspiracy of the Garage*, a book published in 2016 which retraces the history of the garage and analyzes its influence on the fabrication of a cultural identity.

Their research identifies Frank Lloyd Wright as the first architect to attach the garage to a home, specifically for his client Frederick C. Robie, whose eponymous house was built in 1910. Now a landmark, this house epitomizes the Prairie Style, the first architectural style considered uniquely American, and essentially introduces the concept of suburbia in general.

In his research, Ortega Govela found that the footprint of the Robie House was later used by the real estate developer Joseph Eichler to construct a lot of similar houses across California. Erlanger, whose work circles around network culture and the use of digital technologies, became enthralled when they discovered that it was within the footprint of one of these houses that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak assembled the first personal computer and founded Apple.



The myth surrounding Jobs was that he had the ability to distort reality. One of the original members of the Apple Macintosh design team coined a term to describe this ability: *reality distortion field*, or RDF. Jobs, with a subtle mix of charm, charisma, and bravado, could notoriously make an audience, as well as himself, believe that what seemed impossible was in fact possible. Through RDF, he could generate desire and build support for his ideas.

Erlanger later argued that all the tools Steve Jobs ended up creating allow us to further distort reality, and observed that the financial demise of the garage is now propagated through technology that was created within it. The tools allowing for the digitization of currency which were created in a garage turned out to be instrumental in manufacturing a massive crisis of the housing market and home ownership.

Erlanger developed this reflection in the work *I Am No Viper, Yet I Feed*, a sound piece created for her 2016 exhibition, *The Oily Actor*, at What Pipeline in Detroit.

Programmed to pick up data from the real estate valuation website Zillow, the work collects daily the five most recent data points (i.e. number of rooms or square footage) for foreclosed homes within the boundaries of the city where it is installed. These data points then speed up or slow down a musical playlist of twelve songs, each of them released on a year that legislation was passed to indirectly facilitate the 2008 financial crisis.

Titled after William Shakespeare's play *Pericles* and referring to the incestuous relationship between King Antiochus and his daughter, *I Am No Viper, Yet I Feed* denounces the cannibalistic nature of capitalism as a system eating its young. Automatically adjusting to the area where the work is exhibited, the program translates physical and long-lasting space into something ephemeral, therefore echoing the instability of home ownership.

Translation of materials, space, and data, are recurring interests in Erlanger's practice. Data translation was further explored in the work *April Heat*, shown in her 2016 exhibition, at Mathew NYC, *Dripping Tap*.

The sculptures, office-like filing cabinets meant to preserve both private information and public records, are partially cut out to expose their components. These do not emit sound, however, they have a breathing mechanism and use the same engineering at the core of *I Am No Viper, Yet I Feed*. Although the principle doesn't change, this time the program is calibrated on the price of oil and the red light emanating from the sculpture adjusts to the variations of its market value.

In 1973, a year after Ballard's exploration of the German suburbs, the world's economy was shaken by its first oil crisis. It led the writer to conclude that the American dream "ran out of gas" and that the one certainty about the future was that it would be boring. Ironically, for the following generation of suburban teenagers, the sole means to escape boredom was, as Erlanger would put, "maybe the inside of a car. Driving somewhere and getting high or driving somewhere to get away from parents, teachers, and ultimately ourselves."

In whatever way, the system doesn't let go. Addressing the cyclicity of capitalism, Olivia Erlanger often compares this phenomenon to an *ouroboros*, a symbol dating as far back as Egyptian iconography, which depicts a serpent eating its own tail.

In *Dripping Tap*, the visitors were also confronted to a pair of forked tongues coming off the wall. Maximized vipers tongues, petrified yet intimidating, sensing their surroundings, possibly for a prey to catch, just like snakes use their tongues for olfactory purposes. Titled *Slow Violence*, this sculpture reminds us that the ferocity of a system might be discreet, that fury can be quiet, but mostly that if the threat is only coming slowly, it surely keeps getting closer.

Slow Violence, 2016 (opposite page) Sideways Time, 2016 (p. 110) Raft for *Lophophagi*, 2016 (p. 112) Raft for *The Doll in Glass*, 2016 (p. 113) All images Courtesy: the artist

