

# NEWMODULR

JAMES CARL + BRIAN JUNGEN + NESTOR KRUGER + AN TE LIU + DAMIAN MOPPET

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Cell phones, lunch trays, air conditioners, tracts of suburban housing – the everyday is made up of modular clutter and all the artists in this exhibition make use of it. They do so either directly, or by replicating and representing it. Somewhere between design and architecture, close to both but not collapsing into the functions of either, the artists' works participate in the visual qualities of the modern movement (its visionary anticipation and elaboration of the grids of modern architecture, the stacks of standardized goods, the beauty of modularity); but they do not share the future-oriented convictions. Earlier, standardized equivalence could stand as a utopian image for social equality. Today, the modular is the very matrix of the material and social worlds, one that continues to replicate and realize itself — with intensifying permutations and variations – throughout all facets of everyday life. The works in this exhibition approach it as an action in process and as effects. They take account of it — highlighting the generic, following up on its wicked speed, its virtual multiplications, and its uncanny, ornamental, and aberrant aggregations.

In AN TE LIU's *Untitled (Complex II)*, (2002), the pervasiveness of modular construction is visualized in sculptural terms. Trained as an architect, An Te Liu has been experimenting with the modular forms of household appliances as stand-ins for architecture (which could imply the opposite as well). Several units of air-conditioners (ionizers and purifiers) are placed together on a platform to suggest an architectural model or a bird's eye view of a generic 'complex' of moderate, and modernist high-rises interspersed with a biomorphic structure and odd-ball public sculpture made from parts of exercise machines and orthopedic aids. Plugged in, the appliances look like the type of building notorious for its hermetically sealed, climate and air-controlled interior while the constant buzz of the equipment is a grating reminder of the contradictions of contemporary cleansing — its noise- and climate-polluting consequences. This inevitable infection of the idea of modernist "purity" is also at work in Liu's wallpapered version of aerial views of a Nevada suburb, titled *Pattern Language (tantric)*, 2002. Spliced like a kaleidoscopic image into a kind of multiplied Rorschach-test, the repetitive and generic form of suburban housing tracts not only looks like exuberantly decorative wall-paper, ornamental to the point of the baroque; it also suggests a charged "tantric" surface for projecting or reading there the most intimate, and apparently all-consuming desire for domestic stability and uniformity as bliss.

NESTOR KRUGER has been doing digital conversions, subjecting nature and given architectural situations to modular (re)vision. In a recent, ongoing work titled *Correction* (2000-), the artist digitally represents and revises his family's farmhouse, from the sunken floors and bent frames, to the overloaded shelves in his father's study and the haphazard load of books and files that they bear. Juxtaposed to the photographs of a settled and warped architecture, Kruger presents new, digitally generated blueprints that incorporate and "correct" the building with all its contents. The undulating shapes have been transformed into efficient modules; in later versions, these are exploded and randomly dispersed across the page. Used and unused space read the way in which negative and positive space do in high modernist abstraction, but also as a disquieting struggle between efficiency and disorder, encroaching sense and eccentric particularity. The new installation takes its point of departure in the architectural design of a glazed façade. The measurements of the existing modular units of windows and doors are digitally re-configured and then physically mapped onto the windows and doors in a new graphic formation (with vinyl strips) — producing the visual effect of a virtual, refracted, and multiplied architecture within an existing sequence of modules. The generic is as pervasive as it is easy: it is possible to reconstruct and add, mutate and vary it from its smallest entity, a desktop computer, maybe even a diskette.\*

Model making is a matter of scale – the small version invokes the large realization. It is therefore a matter of play, imagination and desire, whether twisted or turned. DAMIAN MOPPETT's untitled series of photographs (1997/2002) feature tableaux of cardboard and foam-core models representing large-scale urban building

complexes. Clearly homemade, they represent attempts at architectural model making by the novice – or, as Damian Moppett also described it, the attempts of either housewives or plumbers at making something larger than themselves. Even their staging for the camera suggests this. The blocks of varied versions of modern to postmodernist building shapes are presented against a simple bed sheet backdrop, or on a basic studio table amongst glue bottles and scissors. Strikingly, the modular nature of architectural building blocks, the aggregate variability, lends the non-professional construction a semblance of the plausible. It underlines in the fantasy a sense of actuality, as suggested by the serious specificity of the titles Century City, The Babich Arena with Ehrlich Amphitheater and Parking Complex, 12th and Dragamahn Street, etc. Perhaps not unrelated to An Te Liu's demonstration of the continuum of the modular, the replication of the generic from the minute to the gigantic, Moppett's images display a potential equivalence of its imagination – between the building blocks of child's play, the constructions of the novice, the fabrications of the set director, and the concrete moulds of architects' fantasies. Play (like building forts or sand-castles), and the power of architecture to define positions and places in space are implicated in one another. Moppett's images attest to the desire to "build" to one's imagination, to the dream of access to actualization. The modern, as shown here, undercuts what among professionals (including postmodernists) is often understood by the term 'modernism,' namely the now reified style of the future as embodied in the pantheon of established masters.

JAMES CARL, on the other hand, offers deadpan, precise re-fabrications of modern products – stoves, washing machines, car tires, rice cookers. Hand-cut from a template in cheap materials such as cardboard (normally used for packaging but not for the goods), or corrugated plastic (the stuff of cheap signage for sell offs), they are meticulously crafted. And yet, complete with buttons, lids, and other indices of functionality, they are always only blanks. Without functional guts or working components, these often serially produced sculptures (or multiples) are the karaoke performance of the objects of contemporary desire: domestic wealth, convenience, and leisure. The current exhibition includes (in addition to an oversize, outdoor, fiberglass replica of a beach ball) a life-size videocassette, disc player, cell phone, and other gadgets from the *Empty Orchestra series* (1995-1997). Hand-carved in stone – the perhaps most ancient technology and material for making ever-lasting things – these petrified objects make a starkly ironic, and slow counterpart to the real-life model. The latter's actual tenure in the world is characterized by instant technological supercession. In Carl's objects it is precisely the actual fleeting, temporary existence (or even obsolescence) that is cut in stone. The sculptures are slowly made but immortalize a blip. By implication, they evoke other contradictions in the lived relation to the global product – labour wages in the diaspora in relation to instant consumption in North America; or, the use-value of certain gadgets in the under-industrialized world where a video-cassette, for instance, may well be as useful as a rock.

BRIAN JUNGEN, who shares James Carl's interest in the units, modules, pre-fab manufactured products of the modern world, does not replicate but uses the actual thing, its modular identity, in repetition to make an altogether different thing. Nike running shoes are cut and sewn to resemble North West Coast First Nations ritual masks, or an ample collection of standard plastic patio-chairs are cut and fixed to one another to make a large replica whale skeleton. *Isolated Depiction of a Passage of Time* (2001), which is included in this exhibition, is slightly different in that it replicates someone else's, famously ingenious, and famously failed, appropriation of modular units: a prisoner once stacked lunch trays leaving a hollow interior large enough to hide in for an attempted escape. In Jungen's work, the stacked lunch trays suggest an uncanny parallel between the modular dispensation of food, the social institutions that regulate standard codes of conduct, and the statistical estimation of populations. Initially produced for a prison museum, Jungen's colour coded, stacked trays represent the number of aboriginals in Canadian prisons, ordered according to the number of years of their prison terms. If the ingenuity of the escape vehicle is that it uses the means of imposed identity as a defense against the panoptic gaze of that structure, the television set contained in the hollow of the lunch trays (playing random programming) seems to suggest the impossibility of escape from the reach of visual apprehension.

All the artists' works in this exhibition occupy the modular as perhaps the exemplary emblem of modernity. They evoke its thorough replication in the most minute and in its largest forms – from the digitalized module to consumer goods and to the very shape of the city. But, more than merely highlighting modularity – its ubiquity in contemporary culture, it is represented in the work as if on a knife's edge. It is equally the existing matrix of the everyday as it is a matter of its twisted, imaginative, estranged and aberrant appropriation. It is at once 100% generic and 100% specific\*\*. This is no straightforward appropriation, a wresting away and assumption of power in different hands so much as it is a description of a process and of means.

-BARBARAFISCHER

\*\*/\* These phrases are taken from Jean Attali "The Roman System, or the Generic in All Times and Tenses," in *Mutations* (Bordeaux: ACTAR, Arc en rêve centre d'architecture, 2001), p. 23