



Miser Now

Oblique Strategies

Issue 02

Suite America

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MONTHLY
PAYMENTS

FREE
DELIVERY

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There are only three stores left of Richmond's Furniture Row, now restricted to two blocks on Broad Street between where it is crossed by Adams and Jefferson. Around 1950 there were as many as twenty-five of these huge showrooms, the first of which had been constructed in the 1880s as a four-story loft building by Philip Levy and Company specifically for the display of household furniture. These businesses remained predominantly Jewish. Its headquarters in Richmond, Heilig Myers with its one-thousand outlets was once the largest furniture store in the world before it collapsed through over-extension. From the start, Furniture Row had served all of Virginia, as customers were prepared to travel to the city from remote towns to select their lounge or bedroom suite. That kind of market was sustainable before the development of the suburbs and malls accompanied the middle class in its move away from the central Richmond neighborhoods. In the wake of that flight remained the poorer white and African-American communities who now provide the principal customers for the remaining stores. Accordingly, the type of furniture on display and the transactions for its exchange have altered. Overstuffed armchairs of Botero proportions encircle gilt and glass coffee tables which invariably support bulbous table lamps protected by plastic covers. We are not in Ikea anymore. Here quality registers as the glisten and dazzle of gilt fixtures and cushion covers of the all-engulfing sofas that promise an ultimate in luxuriouness. There's an extraordinary melancholy to these warehouse spaces. In contrast to the aspirational furniture, these old interiors are in spectacular disrepair. With four floors of around six-thousand square feet each, Popkin Furniture Co. is the largest of the three stores. Their loft spaces have barely altered since construction, with moulded tin ceilings intact behind the inadequate fluorescent lighting and bare floorboards beneath assorted carpet fragments. The institutional severity of the deep green and cream (now beige) walls feels suffocating. Many of the windows are covered up with old packing material – perforated plywood and flattened cardboard boxes – while the open metal cage of an original passenger elevator rattles between the floors. In all three stores the furniture is crammed in so tight it's hard to circulate. In Seldon Furniture Warehouse there's no space at all between the ranks of sofas and armchairs, shoved back three or four deep against the wall. Central Furniture is the most consummate arranger, angling rows of bedroom dressers in front of garish paintings, encircling the columns with upended carpet rolls, or lining up table lamps on a counter. Most of the latter's furniture is grouped in a dense maze around the centre of the space where you watch your step lest you stumble on a ceramic panther or an orange glass Brancusi.

however, buy their furniture elsewhere. On the Saturday I was photographing, the stores were visited only by African-Americans. There are no cash sales in this trade. Instead the businesses survive on the interest payments of customers who can neither afford to buy outright nor obtain easy credit. Customers' purchases are financed by the store as hire-purchase; or if their credit is truly appalling, through lay-away, where the furniture is held until all the monthly payments are over. In either case the transaction is usually complete within a year. Surviving furniture stores will buy the customer accounts of retailers who are going out of business. As with high-street banks, the value of these accounts lies in customer loyalty as generations return to a first supplier to furnish the new homes of their expanding families. This ghetto-fabulous ostentation on a budget – an aesthetic of glitter, stuffing and flashy laminates – used to be called 'borax' in the trade. Yet the furniture is anything but cheap. Popkin's lounge suites can run as high as \$5000 and their larger beds start from around \$1500. Typically customers are interested in 'full-service' where they will pay to have a crew from the shop furnish an entire room, right down to the rugs, sculptures and paintings. Quite affordable at around \$50, the latter are thickly-painted works, busy with images of African wildlife, Italianate towns or appropriated motifs from idealizing twentieth-century abstraction. Also popular are the large rugs printed with images of lounging tribesmen, leopards, or jazz musicians, selected for their appeal to the African-American community.

These stores enact an important service. For a modest down payment opulence is available as a utopian staging post. The burden of decrepit inner-city housing can be more easily borne if the furnishings within promise sensory oblivion. Marcuse's 'affirmative' character of culture, where art's image of a better world serves to alleviate society from responsibility, is here unreservedly embraced in face of the indefinite deferral of legislated improvements. In relation to domestic needs, to family security, everyday comfort and sensual fulfilment, the furniture stores offer an immediate progression.

As the furniture stores fail or move away, developers are converting the upper stories to apartments for the middle-class professionals moving back into the city. These newcomers



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In the final chapter of Franz Kafka's *Amerika* the unskilled and unemployable young immigrant, Karl Rossmann, responds to a poster inviting job applicants for The Oklahoma Theatre. He's not sure about the omission of any mention of a wage but 'for Karl there was one great attraction in the placard. "Everyone is welcome," it said. Everyone, that meant Karl too.' Looking to reverse the series of inexplicable setbacks that have marred his time in America, Karl attends the interview which takes place at the racetrack. Applicants are directed to the bookmakers's booths, one for each profession, where interviewers wait. In a comedy of misunderstandings he is finally accepted by the bureau for European Intermediate pupils, the furthestmost booth. To the incredulity of the officers, he gives his name as 'Negro' and still gets the job. Utopia indeed.

After Furniture Row, Martin Kippenberger's 'The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika"' seems at first like an absurdist reflection on the sad circumstances underlying the conferment of happiness in the marketplace. Choice is indeed possible; the impressive massing of furniture in the stores ensures a surface evidence of variety. Yet every selection leads to the same kind of happy end, since a choice constitutes a tacit agreement that one will leave the fundamental conditions of happiness alone and accept the halfway utopia.

'Job Interviews' is Kippenberger's second title for these eccentric furniture ensembles and, in the absence of any people, the chairs become anthropomorphised, seemingly in conversation with each other. They are circus-like in their incongruity where, as if clowning around, they make the most out of ridiculous juxtaposition. Probably this is a case of the prelude configuring the finale such that the entire installation is simultaneously interview for, and participation in, a playfully unproductive and liberating utopia of the Oklahoma Theatre. You could say then that Kippenberger's vision is redemptive, a step up even from Kafka, for he transforms the hysterical oppressiveness of his model, the furniture showroom, into a utopia in the present, right here, now. Kippenberger does a similar thing in other collections where furniture is presented as the imperfect but adequate verification of the presence of utopia. 'Forgotten Interior Design/Problems at Home' juxtaposes photographs of beds with exhibition installation shots. The beds are from hotels or home and are usually empty. It's as if the soporific happiness exuding as a residual memory from so many beds must be proof that the best is already ours. Another collection of photographs titled 'Psychobuildings' collects images of unaccountably peculiar street furniture, public sculpture and architectural fragments as if manifesting utopia in present-day detritus. Like the testimony of blurry UFO images or photographs of the Loch Ness monster, the proof lies in the gap between their astonishing inadequacy and the yearning faith that wills veracity onto such negligible evidence.

The illogic of Kippenberger's work seems driven by an internalised and naturalised set of oblique strategies. It could easily serve as a pack of instructions on its own. 'Make work from photographs of athletes whose underwear is showing'; 'Make sculptures of yourself standing disgraced in the corner'. 'Draw on hotel stationery'. His shifts excite us for their uncharted riskiness. How different is this from the Eno/Schmidt oblique strategies? After all, they're called 'oblique' rather than 'radical' and never threaten the security of procedural and aesthetic decisions with real upheaval. There's nothing that instructs, like a Franciscan summons, to divest all wealth and move to the ghetto. Memories here of Hèlio Oiticica's own strategy as he climbed the Mangueira hill to live amongst the favela poor. So the oblique strategies remain abstract manoeuvres, determined by the conviction that the material conditions for inventive work to continue are a constant. The oblique strategies don't threaten the continuation of work itself but guarantee its survival. You don't pull cards that read: 'You have no ideas anymore. Stop pretending and get a real job' or 'Hitchhike to Tehran and learn Farsi'. And what if the users were thrown into the ghetto by a cultural revolution of life-changing strategies? No longer oblique then, but plunging vertically into another socio-cultural dimension. How do the Furniture Row options seem then? No longer speculating in a detached manner on the immersion in kitsch as an avenue to innovation, but facing it as a plausible route to relative comfort and self-esteem within your community. So the salesman goes: 'Let me ask you then. How much can you afford to spend? Can you spend \$3000. I've got a set upstairs—it's massive—but it's \$5000. For \$200 extra you can get a twelve-spring mattress. Would you take the suite if I give you the bunk beds thrown in?'