

## Education As Cultural Labor

ESTHER HAGENLOCHER  
University of Oregon

JUSTIN NOVAK  
Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design

### INTRODUCTION

This paper borrows its title from the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who encouraged us to look upon all creative practices simply as “cultural labor.” He was taken from us prematurely by AIDS, over a decade ago, but he left us with elegant insights on the importance of an integrated approach to the evolution of culture.

The goal here is not to propose a theoretical analysis of the artist’s small but visionary collection of writings, nor is it to contribute to the body of criticism that surrounds the various architectural works cited herein. It is simply to examine the practical value of employing the phrase “cultural labor” as a trigger in the practice of education and as a characterization of our collective efforts to design a sound future.

### GONZALEZ-TORRES

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is perhaps best known for his interactive, ephemeral sculptural work. Mundane and often sentimental objects (such as strings of lights) were often employed in unexpectedly elegant minimalist arrangements. Many of Gonzalez-Torres’s installations invite the viewer to remove a piece of the work, such as a common wrapped candy to be taken from a mass of them piled neatly into a corner of the gallery, or a single unlimited edition print to be collected from a stack on the floor. Exhibitors must continually replenish this artwork as the constituent parts dwindle in number, presenting numerous challenges to conventional notions of art collecting, propriety and preservation.

His work is rarely discussed without reference to his personal battle with AIDS, and his passionate devotion to AIDS activism was often linked to his political stance against the Gulf War of the early 1990’s and other US administration policies. He has been cited as a major influence on a great number of leading contemporary artists and thinkers, and yet his contributions have largely been under estimated. Indications are that this is now changing, particularly with his selection as the United States’ official representative at the 2007 Venice Biennale, in an extremely rare posthumous award.

The writings of Gonzalez-Torres, like his art, reflected a rigorous inquiry into the relationship among creative practices, teaching, and the larger culture. His investment in the idea of “cultural labor” lay primarily in challenging social distinctions between artistic production and political activism. He perceived a socially proscribed division of labor--much as one finds on a factory assembly line, but on a grand scale--keeping creative practitioners and teachers in categories separate from professional activists. It is a distinction he was naturally inclined to refute, as he himself was deeply committed to a mission that integrated both roles.

Although his own conceptually driven practice did not often delve into the applied arts, we might find great value in extending his critique to the patterns and assumptions common to various categories of creative production. Contemporary art, applied design, architecture and urban design all continually exert influence upon one another, and the ethical and political agency inherent in all of these creative practices is inescapable. While

these fields feature prevailing priorities and methodologies that are distinct and might at times diverge, they all shape our culture in such profound ways that we cannot afford not to assess them interdependently.

The suggestion that we cast off traditional vocational identities was certainly intended as a provocation. By situating us all in the same stream, whatever our goals or priorities, Gonzalez-Torres challenged the comfort we all take in specialization. Moreover, this approach insists that we recognize in all material things their implicit ideologies. Most fundamentally, the suggestion holds us accountable. It challenges self-indulgence, and it serves to remind architects that there is much more at stake than the balancing of aesthetics and practicalities.

The language of Gonzalez-Torres merely echoes a much larger postmodern milieu. As Frederick Jameson has noted, we live in an era in which "the law of being is de-differentiation," where "the distinction between the old specialized disciplines is constitutively effaced and they now fold back on each other..." (from "Future City" by Frederick Jameson, *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003). The term "cultural labor" manifests this reality, but it is more aggressive in its insistence on dissolution.

The notion of "cultural labor" lies at the heart of the collaborative teaching efforts of this paper's two authors, colleagues for three years at the University of Oregon in Eugene, within which the Departments of Architecture and Art share one roof. Their exchanges reflect a pedagogy that embraces Gonzalez-Torres's vision, seeking to bring together students of art and architecture, and proposing an evolving curriculum modeled on creative practitioners from various fields who defy expectation and categorization.

One primary focus is on the heightened engagement of poetics that might occur with the blurring of categories within artistic production and architectural work. The "cultural laborer" is an increasingly apt notion here in light of the growing number of contemporary artists who are behaving rather like product designers and, conversely, the tendency of leading figures in the applied arts who are embracing strategies more typical of contemporary artists. The paragraphs that follow will

outline some of these prominent creative practices, and the manner in which they might serve as pedagogical models.

### MODEL PRACTICES

In one of the most innovative collaborative projects of this young century, Alicia Framis, a Spanish artist known for her conceptual performance art, adopted the context and methodologies of the fashion industry, collaborating with designers to produce a socio-politically charged line of clothing called Anti-Dog (so named because of its ability to protect women of color from attack dogs trained by racist skinheads). The cultural contribution of her practice, in this case, truly defies identification, as her role blurs any recognizable vocational context.

In the field of architecture, Diller + Scofidio have provided an outstanding example of hybrid practice, providing audiences with experiences that serve at once as site-specific installation art and functional architecture. Their project Mural, an installation at the Whitney Museum in 2003, subjected the museum's archetypal white walls to an automated hand drill that perforated the architecture with random holes over the duration of the exhibition. The piece acted as both a functional framework for the exhibition and a critique of the cultural constructs employed by institutions of that kind. For Swiss architects Herzog & De Meuron, cultivating relationships with contemporary artists has for decades been central to their practice. The Library in Eberswalde, for example, is built out of concrete plates adorned with images by the photographer Thomas Ruff. Artist and architect here guided one another into territory that neither could have discovered on their own. The artist infused his work with an interactivity difficult to attain with more conventional applications of the photograph, while the collaboration allowed the architect to daringly defy expectations of architectural ornament. Allan Wexler, Andrea Zittel, Robert Wilson, James Turrell, and Rachel Whiteread also serve as noteworthy reference points for this pedagogical model of fusing the practices of art and architecture.

The single most valuable exemplar for this pedagogical model is the manner in which French architect Jean Nouvel has blended poetics, politics and practical realities in his Institut Du Monde

Arabe in Paris. The structure embodies the very highest aspirations implied in this notion of creative labor devoted to the service of culture. The building's south façade of decorative windows is a breathtaking tribute to the traditions of Islamic culture, but the fact that it recalls those historical geometric patterns with the geometries of the shutters of a camera lens is truly activist. The invitation to the institute's visitors is to peer out, at Paris, with the probing gaze of the photographer. By shifting the focus from the immigrant culture to that of the host city, Nouvel poetically subverts the colonial legacy. The Institute's attempt to educate is truly possible only because the dominant culture of France is held to scrutiny and put into the role of the "other."

For one of the most impressive poetic achievements in contemporary architecture to function also as an energy-saving device makes these shutters, and the structure, all the more powerful. Bound, as architects are, to a myriad of nuanced technical details and physical practicalities, Nouvel has nonetheless created a structure as conceptually tight, as culturally challenging, and as daringly poetic as that of any artist with the limitations only of his or her own choosing.

The Institut Du Monde Arabe provided Nouvel with a unique opportunity to integrate architecture with an activist political stance, one that was inherent in the very purpose with which the building was charged. Still, it offers clues to how broader architectural concerns might respond to Gonzalez-Torres's challenge of synthesizing the various social responsibilities incumbent upon the practice.

"Cultural laborers" needn't operate only on a grand scale, as is evidenced by ceramic artist Ole Jensen, who embraces the expansive potential of tableware design. Enlisted by Royal Copenhagen so that the company might update its identity--after two centuries of hand-painted frilly delftware--and evolve a more contemporary streamlined Scandinavian aesthetic, Jensen produced a serving bowl that's been spliced with a strainer. It moves from food preparation to service with one graceful gesture, and it brings to the table a tribute to the meal's preparer poetically inscribed in its very form. Jensen's tableware is a prominent example of a truly performative design, in the cultural sense as well as the physical one.

## MULTIPLICITY AND INTEGRATION

"Cultural labor" is put forth here not as a singular model, but rather as a filter, or a cipher, by which we might view the expansiveness of any given strategy. If one is to entertain the project at hand as "cultural labor," then aesthetics, social responsibility, and psychological and physical health ought not appear to be separate concerns.

Architectural design, furniture design, and product design together form a continuum of experience, facilitating and informing the user's negotiation of daily life. Yet this interconnectivity is rarely sought from the start. How might a curriculum founded on the idea of "cultural labor" help to bridge these concentric arenas of performance? The word "performance" itself speaks both of function and of audience, and its significance is at the very core of the collaborative efforts undertaken by this paper's authors. The catalyst for this model of creative practice is neither concept nor style, but rather the performative potential of the materials, of the design, and, ultimately, of daily life.

Considering the speed with which our culture is shifting, both globally and locally, one cannot devote oneself to the labor of culture without wholeheartedly embracing the unknown. An architecture education that is rooted in building or design traditions but that proceeds with an expectation of the unknown can draw upon the dialogue (and the exquisite tension) between past and future. Freed of current trends and tendencies, yet inevitably a product of a moment in time, a "cultural labor" curriculum proposes a practice that embraces unpredictable eventualities.

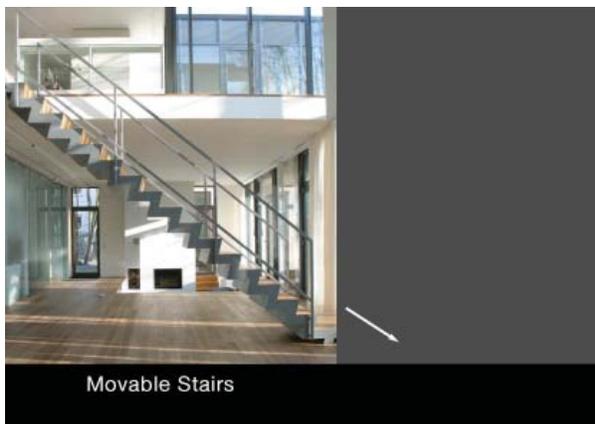
Failings and limitations of twentieth-century architectural paradigms have dampened the visionary aspirations of the contemporary architect, and current discourse in the field tends to be skeptical of anything that might resemble social engineering. Innovations abound that revolutionize functionality, heighten efficiency, and provide spectacle, but lost among these priorities is the pursuit of architecture in service of a more enlightened society.

Although we are all by now aware of the vulnerabilities of Modernist approaches, a revival of the utopian, visionary spirit might be desirable if

we aspire not to one ideal future but to an array of ideal futures. Gonzalez-Torres's invitation to his audience to fully participate, and indeed to change his work, would suggest that the practice of architecture as "cultural labor" might be similarly open-ended. The challenge, then, is perhaps to celebrate a multiplicity of eventualities, including ones that we cannot anticipate.

An architecture that celebrates a singular pattern of living represents a prescription. An alternative would offer spaces inscribed with possibility, an architecture that not only accommodates evolving priorities, but also invites them. On the grand scale of urban planning, the challenge of adaptability is daunting, but coauthor Esther Hagenlocher has been employing such a strategy on a local, domestic scale. She has been putting this model into practice in the design of several flats and a project called a "house for generations." Assuming unforeseeable changes in the makeup and dynamics of a family, this structure is rich in adaptable features that can serve as possible solutions for possible futures.

This practice embraces the unpredictability of the years to come, seeking to develop highly flexible domestic environments. It stands to reason that as families change, expectations of the "home" will inevitably evolve. A fluid conception of the "future" demands a highly sensitized practice, perhaps even a humble one. Just as importantly, this vision would reshape architectural pedagogy. Might we as educators adopt the notion of "home" as a work-in-progress, a domestic laboratory, and a continuing collaboration?



Movable Stairs

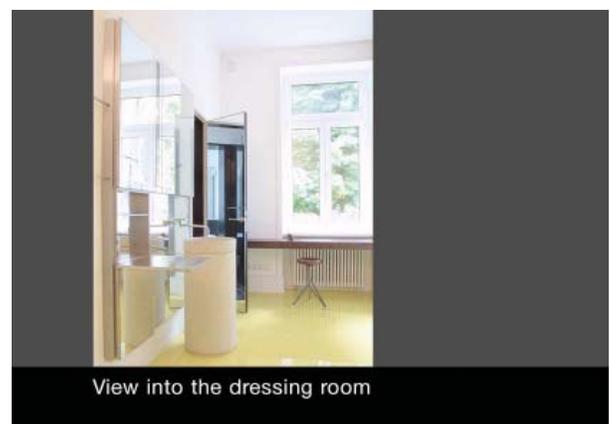
Image 1: House For Generations

## CURRENT PEDAGOGY

Architects have much to gain by looking to realms outside the traditional scope of their vocation in order to develop new strategies for designing future environments. "Green chemistry" is a perfect example of a budding science that demands further integration with architectural practice, and the sciences as a whole (social as well as physical) certainly must be included in a "cultural labor" pedagogical framework.

The notion of "cultural labor" does not preclude specialization, but it does suggest that the practitioner's specialized knowledge might be employed in the pursuit of an expansive mission. Alternating between private domestic spaces and public exhibition design, coauthor Esther Hagenlocher has built a career on the development of innovative aesthetic experiences. Although the practice is driven primarily by the practical needs of a space, these are deemed to be inseparable from the aesthetics and the poetics of the living patterns unfolding therein. The realm of exhibition design, in particular, has developed refined sensibilities in regard to the potent effect of light and color. Walls of saturated color, highly reflective surfaces, and LED projections have all been employed to various effects. The performative qualities of light are central to Hagenlocher's creative practice, and she has brought these sensibilities to the teaching of her furniture studios.

The current furniture studio requires to "remix" IKEA products. Inherent in this project is a critique of the utopian pretensions of the corpora-



View into the dressing room

Image 2: Reflective Architecture

tion and the conformist nature of its products. In this regard, the project adopts the priorities of a contemporary art practice, but a second stage requires the students to develop the work further within a specific physical and cultural context, including an empirical examination of the effects of light on the efficacy of each design.

Key to both this professional practice and to a “cultural labor” curriculum is an understanding that craftsmanship, too, is a central performative element. Craftsmanship often tends to be seen as a conservative value, yet its employment is central in providing adaptable living solutions. A foremost strength of this coauthor’s architectural practice resides in her designs for space-making furniture. The success of this furniture relies entirely on delicate nuances that afford easy access without intrusiveness, nuances that only the finest quality craftsmanship can offer.

Gonzalez-Torres’s choice of the word “labor” is notable here, considering that activism and art are not typically framed in such terms. When applied to all creative contributions to the culture, the use of the word “labor” rejects hierarchical distinctions between conception and execution. If all creative efforts that benefit society were characterized as labor of some kind, then design, craft, and perhaps even consumption might be perceived as one continuous dialogue.

### FACTORY: A HYBRID CURRICULUM

The remainder of this paper is devoted not to the beneficial influence that contemporary art methodologies can have upon the practice and education of architecture and design, but on the converse. This hybrid curriculum has adopted many of the priorities common to applied arts, such as architecture, in the creation of a student art collaborative working within the Art Department’s ceramics program. Some of the key successes of this venture are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Aided by experiences in actual factories, coauthor Professor Novak initiated an experiment in product design and manufacture within the University called FACTORY. The project created a facility for slip casting, the principal method of industrial ceramic production, and the strategy of appropriating the aesthetics of contemporary mass-production is central to the project. For the

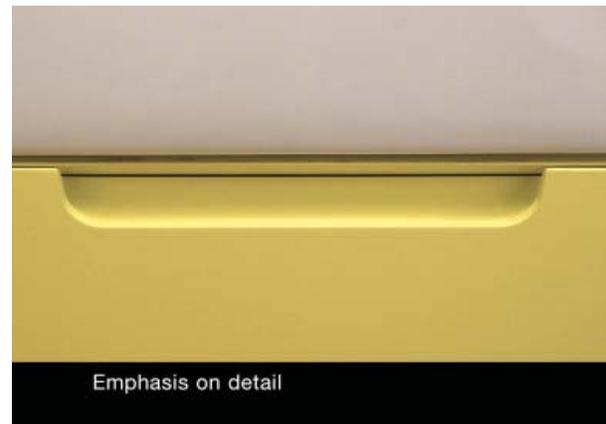


Image 3: Quality of Detail



Image 4: The Enlightenment Room

vast majority, it is the mass-produced object that shares the closest intimacy with our bodies, and its sleek reductive aesthetics embody a sensory lingua franca. Through kind of this project participants in the class investigate how objects perform in society: how they define, confine, guide, or seduce bodies. The central mission is to adopt the goals of commodity production, but to do so in the context of a contemporary art practice based upon inquiry. Implied in the title is a challenge to engage the mass-produced object, much as the mass-produced image was probed in Andy Warhol’s Factory.

One example of a student FACTORY project that hybridized a contemporary art practice grounded in inquiry (and cultural critique) with mass-market driven product design was an event called “PUMP.” As a collective venture to raise funds for students to participate in the preeminent national ceramics conference NCECA, FACTORY mounted a

Valentine's Day event. The design team took on the challenging task of creating a product line that genuinely celebrated all of the positive aspects of Valentine's Day, such as love and sexiness and giving, but eschewed the emotional and aesthetic bankruptcy of the iconography typically associated with the holiday.

The resulting product line, called PUMP, utilized a medical illustration of the cross-section of a human heart as its central icon. The streamlined forms, the hygienic white glaze, the cool grey decals and platinum luster all lent the product line an air of surgical precision--an aesthetic that dovetailed perfectly with the heart image. The unsentimental scientific reference was further accentuated by a display system of stainless steel tables and white lab coats that were procured for the sales staff. To choose a viscerally potent image of the heart was an act that, in essence, reclaimed that human organ, refuting the hollow abstraction that has saturated our culture (thanks to companies like Hallmark), emphasizing instead the nuances and vulnerabilities of the body.

FACTORY seeks to challenge the tendency of contemporary art pedagogy to shy away from commerce. It is, after all, mass-production that shapes our desires as a populace, and it constitutes a much more exciting challenge to engage it head-on rather than critique it from a safe distance. The cultural inquiry at the heart of the curriculum is perhaps best expressed in Guy Debord's insistence that "desire for consciousness and consciousness of desire... are the same project" (from *Society and the Spectacle*)

A FACTORY project belonging to Nick Dong beautifully typifies the ambitious merging of product, architecture and critique characteristic of contemporary art. Dong was an MFA in the Art Department in 2002, who manufactured tens of thousands of ceramic tiles to produce an installation called the Enlightenment Room. In this experience, viewers enter a darkened space and soon discern a seat at the end of a short corridor, but only after motion-sensors have triggered a shower of light. The interior is covered, floor to ceiling, in glazed white porcelain, a highly reflective surface that literally bathes the space in light. The unique design of these tiles captures the soft, pillowed form of quilting, distilling and hybridizing the distinct sensual experiences of bedroom and bathroom.



Image 5: Pump teacups

The result is an uncanny abstraction of domestic bliss, a piece of architecture that psychoanalyzes our fetish of hygiene by stripping the aesthetic conventions of the lavatory of actual plumbing or any other physical function.

## CONCLUSION

This pedagogical framework founded upon the precept of "cultural labor" is offered in the hopes that an appreciation of the external criteria and discipline required of architectural practice can serve to counterbalance the self-absorption of the artist, while designers can benefit from the artist's poetic imagination as they attend to social and practical functions. Freed of their respective compulsions to embellish or solve, the two constituencies can perhaps together turn their curiosities toward the quiet resonance of the patterns of everyday life and find ways to both facilitate and illuminate their poetic power through subtle inquiry.

## ENDNOTES

1. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix. "Practices : The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labour." *Art & Design*, vol. 9, no. 1/2 (Jan./Feb. 1994), p. 82-85
2. The Art Institute of Chicago. *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas (1995)*. Exhibition catalogue, texts by Madeleine Grynsztejn and Dave Hickey.
3. Bloemink, Barbara. *Design [does not equal] Art Functional objects from Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread*. London; New York: Merrell, 2004
4. Ursprung, Philip, Herzog & De Meuron *Natural History*. Montreal Canadian Center for Architecture, Baden Switzerland : Lars Mueller, 2002.