



Text Brian Kuan Wood

Gean Moreno & Ernesto Oroza, research-material till *Pre-city/Post-city*, 2010.

Forces of Radical Pragmatism and Pirate Ethics

Brian Kuan Wood on the Work of Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza

These days one is tempted to think of an increasingly porous boundary between work and life as something specific to recent advances in information work and market-liberal capitalism. Seen this way, a general confusion sets in when trying to locate where economic exploitation takes place, especially when so many working structures have been freed from traditional hierarchical models that superseded the feelings and desires of a worker. Whether this slippery liberation of the working spirit is invoked by subsidy-slashing politicians or managers using it as a bargaining chip to either double someone's workload or slide out of paying for worker benefits, one thing is clear: this liberation doesn't feel so liberating!

Of course, it has been argued often that this »new flexibility« was never really a liberation of work as much as a deferral of both authority and support down to the level of a dispersed network of self-managed individuals. But if we look just beyond the professional class of workers that commentators such as Richard Sennett and David Brooks have dealt with as arising from economic deregulation and the venture capital boom of the 1990s, we find that instability, speculative opportunism, and technological ingenuity have quite a long history—one that has been consistently suppressed and reformulated (for better or worse) by positivist modernist discourses, social-democratic compromises, and market-liberal reforms alike. Now, it is the parasitic side of flexibility that becomes increasingly more vivid as coercive top-down »austerity measures« invoke free will as a rationale for downsizing and liquidating coordinated support structures.

Perhaps there is another way of looking at things. Underneath all of this has always flowed a set of practices that assume forms far removed from administrative protocols, that instead mark an already-existing precariousness precluding new-economy and neoliberal flexibility alike: the instability of life itself. This is where the top-down comes into contact with the bottom-up, where a formal, reflex ingenuity rubs up against the seedy underbelly of the regulated and deregulated alike, where forces of convenience and necessity cast

ideological products as immanent, material forms of de facto commonality and shave mass-produced goods into the ruins of idealized collective desire. It is the condition that regulatory protocols, zoning laws, and standardized compatibilities try to push away, but to the extent that those protocols do not apply, or do not function very well, instability remains a fact of life, however repressed to various degrees. It is for this reason that one finds within any economic regime a set of primordial practices that will always fly below the radar of the state, forming a reverse mold of its ideological aspirations, of waste products cast aside precisely for falling outside of legitimate formats. As »free agents« to some degree, these discarded products also carry a promise of life beyond the systems that expelled them—they are potential futures. It is from this fragmentary release of energy that Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza found their collaborative practice.

After being introduced to each other by Cuban artist Glexis Novoa in 2008, the two artists initiated a collaboration that within a short span of time would become highly prolific. A few uninspiring attempts at fusing two separate artistic vocabularies led them to produce *Studio Scrap Stool* (2008), a »no-top-no-bottom« stool constructed from the processes and material remnants of projects in their shared studio space. The stool would function as a map of their future concerns: made of planks of 2"x 4" wood, its vertical pieces were cut only when necessary to fit the standard height of a generic stool (16"), while the uneven lengths of its horizontal pieces were determined by their uses in previous projects. It is important to emphasize that, though Moreno and Oroza cut the wood down to height, this height was not decided by them, but by an already existing standard. The design object marked the point where their collaboration became concerned with design processes working from a zero-point structural concern with fields of contextual forces that produce forms, and it would later zoom out from a discrete object to a means of working with the complexity and richness of this condition through collaboratively written texts, works and exhibitions, and publishing.

Överst: Gean Moreno & Ernesto Oroza, *Studio Scrapwood Stool*, 2008—, pall gjord av restmaterial från konstnärernas ateljé, obegränsad upplaga, varierande storlek.

Underst: Gean Moreno & Ernesto Oroza, *Pre-City*, 2011, installationsbild från Gallery Diet, Miami.

As they have written on the urban salvage yard »It pushes toward a homogeneity that can be sensed just below the surface differences of the actual objects: everything is returned to the condition of raw material, to a kind of value-free blankness ... a process of value-drainage, a blanching-out which may unlock other trapped potentials.«¹ Taken as a whole, it would make sense to address Moreno and Oroza's young, but already prolific collaboration in terms of its extroversion and interest in formal drift. This suggests that the exhibition, the works, the ideas—indeed, the subject of their work—exists outside of their own formats of production and reception, which are primarily observational and research-based. Their practice would thus be best defined as a set of entry points to a formal pattern that surpasses individual observations or instances in its complexity, as a forensic investigation into recurring elastic morphologies latent in urban landscapes and sedimentary layers of social life. Buried in the salvage yard, the crudely rigged-up speakers, improvised milk crate tables, and cheesy decorative motifs of the suburban nursery is a dimension in which waste and meaningless décor together comprise the dark matter of urban shape-giving forces. As they write in the same text on the salvage yard:

The pile of doors has a second effect: it invites one to imagine an entire suburb folded like an accordion, like stage scenery closed in order to be put away. It's almost as if the houses these doors were attached to are tucked between them. Single-family homes like collapsible tents. The suburb as a kind of tent city that, rather than following, anticipates devastating natural disasters. The suburb built to wait for the hurricane that will drag it away. It is *always* hurricane season.²

It is important to point out that this dark matter is not marginal, but profoundly widespread. As an example: architects and urban planners have exhaustively studied the phenomenon of suburban sprawl, and are well aware of how it arises. Las Vegas has been learned from, but in the end architects only learn what they already knew, which is to avoid sprawl at all costs.³ And for good reason: the unplanned and the un-designed are the enemy of modernist standardization and purification, of managed sociality. And yet the same standardized geometries and »purities« of form are employed—not to build housing for the poor, but to sell discount electronics and five year supplies of pet food. It is where the purity of utilitarian function based in the general and the generic forms an ideological vacuum, but this vacuum is itself the shape of a kind of economic substrata—a subconscious that was not accounted for in its

original design. It is an autonomous expression of a web of de facto protocols taking on a life of their own. To a devout modernist, this is pure evil—Bauhaus in reverse.

But for a non-believer or heretic, this landscape is rich with meaning. Without the awareness or the resistance of anticapitalism or the flexibility of hypercapitalism these are practices that are inherently both and simultaneously neither. And while they are typically found in poor communities or discarded landscapes, they stretch far beyond being tied to socioeconomic states. For Moreno and Oroza these practices are significant for being emblems of another kind of physics—one that is more readily apparent under resistant or extreme circumstances, in the places where infrastructure shows its seams, where brutal networks of exchange are formed, and where productive energies borrow whimsically from the forms of upward mobility while also looking downward to the brunt of necessity.

It is a space of exception within capitalist spheres of production, but these practices do not necessarily offer relief, as they are not outside of them either. It is a condition that teeters between the extra-economic and the inter-economic, where private goods and public spaces atomize and swirl around. Keller Easterling has referred to »real estate cocktails« that are »critical materializations of digital capitalism,« and we might say that these practices are subtly disobedient reversals that cycle within the same logic, but as critical digitizations of capitalist material—a breaking down of its ethics, codes, regulations, tastes, and virtues that pushes them to the point of collapse.⁴

In Moreno and Oroza's exhibition *Pre-City* at Gallery Diet in Miami in 2010, a number of works offer a sense of how an approach to this condition could translate to object-production. On one level, the exhibition format may be seen as being somewhat removed from the social pressures and forms that concern their research. But at the same time, for Moreno and Oroza the frame of the exhibition provides its own specific conditions exerting another set of pressures—its own »architecture of necessity«—that can be deployed towards the production and exhibition of objects, as well as to drawing certain parallels between the artists' works and the broader scope of their research.

Pre-City was based on a grouping of two »generic« poles by which certain contemporary cities organize themselves, called »pre-city« and »post-city« by the artists. The »pre-city« side of the exhibition looked to landscaping nurseries, where the primordial and the bourgeois meet in a naturally-occurring Allan McCollum-like world of slightly individuated mass produced forms laid out in rows. From these the artists made a series of lamps using the bizarre fake rocks sold by nurseries as whimsical signposts for



displaying one's street address. Within the exhibition, each lamp displayed the address of the particular nursery where it was purchased. On the »post-city« side of the exhibition, discarded objects from the salvage yard were reclaimed as forensic diagrams. Bizarre stalagmite-like fountains originally made for fish aquariums became exploded lamps whose corded bulbs draped over a pipe running under the ceiling of the exhibition space. Platforms in the space were made from tiles whose patterning appeared to be an error in production. The walls were covered in another pattern printed on newsprint—actually a sheet from a newspaper Moreno and Oroza edited and published on the occasion of the exhibition. A row of pristine refrigerator shelving trays hung on the wall in what appeared to be a series of highly geometric formalist paintings.

On the one hand these objects were literally repurposed to serve an immediate need: as an overturned bucket would be used as a chair, the artists converted raw material to suit the needs of an art exhibition. But at the same time as this repurposing borrowed from the logic of makeshift convenience, it was simultaneously a reflection on how these forces sculpt and arrange objects in space. These are objects that phase between being completely misguided attempts at fitting perfectly within archetypes of domestic or contemporary art environments, while simultaneously exceeding both their original function and their function as art objects, precisely by offering themselves as exemplary carriers of cultural information. A generic future-friendly design exhibition's name was inverted for the exhibition, which was not about the production of new possibilities in an abstract post-city: *Pre-city* was a dip into the dense material of the already-existing.

It is important to point out that Moreno and Oroza have together produced an amount of written and published projects roughly equal in number to exhibited objects. This is not to place emphasis on one aspect of their collaboration over another, but rather should emphasize a de-centered aspect to their overall practice, which cannot be confined purely to the logic of either object-production or research alone. One could argue that research, writing, and physical material converge in all of their work regardless of format, as is especially apparent in the ongoing series of tabloids that Moreno and Oroza publish, of which seventeen have been produced so far. And just as their own works and essays have made their way into the tabloids, the material of the tabloids—both as surface and as content—have made their way back into their works, as well as onto public spaces. In a Batailleian spirit, Moreno and Oroza describe the ink and paper of their tabloids as organic material seeping into the city's systems of circulation:

Employing a standardized typology, our tabloids slip into the systems of production and distribution in which this typology is a central component. Or rather, they emerge—as a kind of altered offspring, a teratological experiment—from these systems ... as a parasite, the

tabloid may burrow deeper than these distributive systems. It may tunnel down into the substructures of the standard tabloid, into the very codes that organize it as both a cultural/social artifact or sign and a unit within a productive system. ... Methodologically, the project may deal less with the alteration of a generic product than with a »genetic« intervention in its productive substrate, with planting an invasive cultural sign in the optimized space of generic production.⁵

Yet while such an »invasive« sign may be resistant, for Moreno and Oroza it can be impossible to distinguish between practices that undermine and those that advance standard formats, such as the proper use of the space of the home. In a fascinating essay entitled »Notes on the Moire House (Or, 'Urbanism' for Emptying Cities),« the artists map out the unstable spaces of residential homes that have been converted to places of work during the day. Again, these are not the converted warehouses of the new economy fetishizing heavy industry as a decorative backdrop for information work—those are fully reconciled spaces. It is another flexibility that points to compression and not expansion, where work and life form an overall »moire« pattern, not of blending, but of crossover, confusion, and makeshift solutions: a house that becomes a restaurant during lunch hours, a former repair shop owner who fixes cars in his garage, a local supermarket butcher's part-time backyard ham curing house, a beauty salon, cake shop, scrap collection yard, a hydroponic marijuana growing house. These are the brothels of hardworking people, the private houses haunted by a lack of alternatives mingled with the need to survive:

These tactical logics are, of course, what urbanists often dismiss and discredit. They are the work of immigrants applying rudimentary knowledge from their backward countries to the »advanced« cities of the West; they are the poor or those on the way to poverty *merely* appealing to a basic survival instinct, fighting the inevitable tooth and nail. What goes unsaid is that these efforts respond to immediate needs and draw on ground-level and proven intelligences. Survival is an unmatched catalyst in the generation of real and innovative solutions. It fires up an intense astuteness in those for whom all guarantees have been taken off the table. It demands a rigorous honing of one's resourcefulness. It calls for a radical pragmatism that overturns all the banal value systems to which one adheres.⁶

Legitimate and illegitimate functions converge in necessity. This brings us to a point where the flexibility, »creativity,« and »ingenuity« of neoliberalism and the new economy overlap with that of immigrant poverty, where the »moire« of work and life, of upward mobility and survival instincts, can be seen as simultaneously generative and demonic. What are the forces that can convert any

situation into a domicile, and how is that a form of ingenuity that no tyrannical regime or economic exploitation can remove? Keller Easterling has called it »pirate ethics«:

The pirate presents puzzling moments when the most passive or the most righteous characters are the most dangerous, and when cheating is the most honest thing to do. The pirate may be an instrument of the state's special stupidity, the means by which it gathers only compatible information to consolidate and fortify its self-reflective world. The pirate might also be the instrument of a less violent environment that is rich in information and receptive to contradiction. The pirate who is too smart to be right exploits an error language to unravel beliefs either in his own purity or in the purity of his resistance. Errors, disguises, and jokes substitute mongrel organizational resilience and ingenuity for innocence and the violence of remaining intact.⁷

It is an order of ingenuity that is both semi-oppressed and hyper-aware. A kind of dark territory that precedes and is suppressed by hierarchical organizing principles, and takes hold when those principles are suspended or revoked—which is to say that they are always there. The next chapter of the neoliberal project will not be about flexibility as opportunity, but as self-reliance and actual poverty—which we can easily foresee in the fact that Western governments have responded to the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis with even harsher and more severe deregulation measures.⁸ While these measures have been marketed as being liberating forms of self-management, and even as a kind of willful decolonization of a population by its own government, they will severely hurt a middle class that needs the stabilizing forces of legitimacy and official recognition to steer their lives. However, those who never benefitted much from the state in the first place (whether rich or poor) will have other technologies at the ready.

As the Western world finds itself in a state of withdrawal, a general downward mobility ensures that, without state-funded safety nets and universal education, the poor can no longer look forward to having the tools of society's most innovative people available to them. Rather, society's innovators can look forward to uncovering forms of ingenuity based more in material necessity than ideal projections. This may sound bleak, but it is not necessarily the end of anything. Aside from being closer in proximity to the social hopes of the Bauhaus or the early avant-gardes than much of what architects or designers produce now, it can be taken in the context of Moreno and Oroza's work to speak to another world of material ingenuity waiting to be explored. And in this sense their line of formal questioning could be considered as addressing an already existing subconscious sphere of flexible labor that has always existed for those without support, and as offering a glimpse into a near future in which such practices will constitute a more general condition if things keep going the way they do. As a support

system collapses, its very structure begins to resemble its repressed waste products, and the professionalization of errant forms of creativity will require the creativity of the deprofessionalized—the unemployed. But perhaps that is not so bad. If one ceiling is removed, another will come in its place. Or, as Moreno and Oroza wrote in »Thirteen Ways to Look at a Landscape Nursery«:

It has to be recognized that »non-professionals« put in the world more objects than individuals educated in design schools and universities. This has tangible repercussions: behind the camera flashes, pristine pedestals, and reams of text that weave a protective web around designer artifacts, the real world is being determined by the morphologies that non-professionals generate in their businesses and workshops. Zurich penthouses and cleverly structured design museums in the German countryside may be repositories for objects that embody the latest advances in design thinking, but house after house after house, block after block after block, neighborhood after neighborhood after neighborhood in Miami—and Miami is here but a stand-in for a prevailing urban typology—has the same faux-stone with house numbers on it, the same jasmine hedge, the same manatee-shaped mailbox, the same panting pouch. At some point, these things that comprise the world we inhabit have to cease being seen as secondary to the »real« advances in object thinking. At some point, what is around us has to be treated as *what is*, as what structures the spaces we inhabit and use and the modes of living that we can forge.⁹ ◆

¹ Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza, »Thirteen Ways to Look at a Salvage Yard,« in *Tabloid 9: Driftwood*, ed. Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza (Miami: Miami-Dade Public Library, 2010).

² Moreno/Oroza, »Thirteen Ways to Look at a Salvage Yard.«

³ Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown proclaimed beautifully that looking »downward to go upward« would be »a way of learning from everything,« in *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), p. 3.

⁴ Keller Easterling, *Enduring Innocence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 1.

⁵ Moreno/Oroza, »Models of Dispersal: Notes on the Tabloid Project.«

⁶ Moreno/Oroza, »Notes on the Moire House (Or, 'Urbanism' for Emptying Cities)«.

⁷ Easterling, »Contemplation: Pirate« in *Enduring Innocence*, 196.

⁸ As just one example among many, Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement last summer of the Big Society initiative for the UK in breathless, revolutionary terms as being »about liberation—the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.« Apparently transcending mere market liberalism to become a sort of officially mandated grass-roots popular movement of empowered self-governed individuals, Big Society promises greater autonomy for local municipalities (or »vanguard communities«), but is essentially a liquidation of government responsibility as a means of reducing spending. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/jul/19/david-cameron-big-society-cuts>.

⁹ Moreno/Oroza »Thirteen Ways to Look at a Landscape Nursery«.