Warehouse of Failed Invention

No matter the level of thought or financial investment made by the bestower of a gift, an empty cardboard box was the ideal present for my young heart. Forget the object; let me play with the packaging. The bigger the better. When I might finally decide to take a second glance at the intended present, I'd take the nearest sharp implement to it, deconstruct it and try to understand how such a mysterious thing could function. This behaviour isn't odd; in fact many well-known toys have been designed with this kind of activity in mind. Referred to as 'take-apart', they intentionally encourage imaginative projection and cognitive development through play. But, that's like structured fun i.e. no fun at all. When the choices are well considered, reasoned and rationalised by an R&D department, the end result places a prescribed framework upon the user.

Roland Barthes described this concern in his text *Jouets*[i]. He denounced contemporary toys as objects that encouraged children into pre-determined gender and class positions, passively accepting roles rather than imaginatively playing with them. Barthes advocated a simple, wooden block as the ideal toy (only one step up from my cardboard box).

In post-war Fordism, there were clear markets opening up for the mass manufacture of products for children. It allowed the move towards more and more (internally) complex toys, manufactured through the assistance of machines on the production line. The requirement of skilled workers was reduced and craft based methods not suitable for the scale of production. The 'creator' of the toy was now not an imaginative workforce, but merely a cog undertaking repeated operations, ad-infinitum, on the production line. Both creator and user, managed.

Post-Fordism production is a small-batch, specialised, techne-based, flexible system with a white-collar, feminised workforce. So, essentially a product can now be offered not just in Ford black, but other colours too (see your Farrow and Ball colour chart for desired shade). Post-Fordism can be seen as a variation rather than re-invention of the production system. So, from the assembly line as linear, we now have modular, cellular, team based or, my particular favourite, the 'U-shaped' line. The emphasis in both production and design is on variation, serialisation and re-design - minimal input for maximum yield.

So, how does one make that great invention a reality in this kind of environment? Cost-effectiveness (read 'profit margin') is a huge factor dictating whether a designer can make his product real. I certainly am not an economist, but it would seem pretty obvious to say that failed products, ones that do not support their intended use, will never reach the assembly line in the first place (though of course, some slip though!). But those objects that are experimental, ingenious or innovative (read 'not profitable') will also never reach the production line.

I have in my possession an early copy of Jacques Carelman's *Catalogue of Extraordinary Objects*[ii], where his drawings explore the absurdity of invention in order to critique consumerism and design. His inventions are totally useless at conception or, at very best, dysfunctional - name some…. Being an illustrator and artist (and member of the College of Pataphysics), the catalogues images become a satirical 'leisure brochure' for the domestic environment. Many of these drawings were physically realised for a recent exhibition at Bilbao International (2011), *Impossible Objects*. In many ways, I wonder if their literal translation into material was truly necessary, made poignant by the irony that one object, his 'Coffeepot for Masochists', is now available for retail[iii]. Impossible objects made possible.

Some projects will reach maturity when technology itself changes. New technology will allow us to project our imagination into physical reality with greater ease, be they intended failures or accidental ones. The 3D printer, a common prototyping tool in the design industry for many years, is now becoming marketed at the consumer. For inventors, trying out new products will become less risky and expensive and in the long term, it will expand the realm of industry and imagination[iv]. In a similar way, the reduced cost in CNC cutting has allowed MIT professor Larry Sass to create and make possible his 'Instant House'[v]. Architecture as a planar system, whole buildings made from replicable cut 8'x4' sheets on a router table. Are we beginning to see a circular production line - A return to the individual as creator, producer and user?

Thinking back to my cardboard box, I might start marketing them as toys - perhaps vary the scale for different age ranges to maximise my market. Its innocent and inviting simplicity, its blank canvas state that allowed it to become a den, a spacesuit or a drum does seem a little lost now as an adult. I'd certainly be surprised to receive it as a present. But, the making of

art is not necessarily a linear production line and the ethos of the cardboard box plays a huge part in how an artist engages with material - re-imagining and re-activating that lost approach to play. It is the material and functional possibilities that we return to again and again in the new 'den' of the art studio or gallery space. It can be instigated through raw material such as cardboard or technology such as rapid prototyping. It is all invention, allowing failure is purely a part of that process.

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[i] Jouets (Translated: Toys) in Barthes, R. (1957) *Mythologies*

[ii] Carelmans, J. (1974) *Catalogue of Extraordinary Objects*. London: Abelard-Schuman

[iii] www.impossibleobjects.com

[iv] *Print Me A Stradivarius* (2011) Economist [online]. http://www.economist.com/node/18114327?story_id=18114327

[v] Bergdoll, B. & Christensen, P. (2008) *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling*. New York: MOMA