Utopia Now and Then
Richard Rinehart

> "Utopias are non-fictional even though they are also non-existent."
> - Frederic Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia" [12]

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will trace the ideation and pursuit of utopia in the modern era; specifically between the years 1890 and 2010. I will begin with utopia in modernism, arguing that modernism has been characterized in part by a broad utopian impulse and I will attempt to define what is modern about modernist utopias. Toward these goals I will outline specific forms the modernist utopia has taken. Drawing from a range of disciplines, from fine art to craft to criticism to architecture, I will demonstrate both the pervasive presence of the utopian impulse in modernism as well as the multiplicity of modernist utopian visions. I will then attempt to characterize the utopian impulse of the contemporary moment and define how it relates to these earlier utopias. I will argue that the relationship of contemporary to modernist utopias is that of revival but not redundancy; rather revival inflected by intervening history. On the nature of this revival I will draw largely on methods put forth in Hal Foster's *Return of the Real* and to a lesser extend Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp". To characterize the contemporary utopian, I will again draw examples from several disciplines from fine art to furniture to television and I will attempt to answer the question of what elements contemporary utopias revive and reject from modernist utopics. I will conclude with notes on the nature of utopia in the modern era, from social project to kitsch to fear of oblivion.

THE MODERN IN MODERNIST UTOPIA

Utopia certainly predates modernity; Thomas More's *Utopia*, the first text to bear the word, was published in 1516 and this is not to mention ancient utopias like Eden (utopia: population 2). Utopia survived the transition into the modern era and, like so much else, was transformed in the process. Here I will argue that utopia thrived under Modernism and I will attempt to articulate what is distinctly modern about modernist utopias.

Creating a break with past civilization is a condition of utopia and it also characterized modernism. Modernism created at least two breaks of this sort, one diachronic and one synchronic. First, modernism constituted a break with pre-industrial, pre-Enlightenment, agrarian societies that preceded it and second modernism, in the form of cultural avant-gardes attempted to break with bourgeois society in its own time; both breaks sought to create a more ideal society. Paradoxically, modernism revived the pre-modern notion of utopia as a way to deal with the crisis of modernity and at some level utopia is always looking backward and forward. The modern way of thinking about utopia, however, is, in many cases, fundamentally new. The pre-modern era often saw utopia as a moral project; a place or time in which people simply behaved better. In the introduction to More's *Utopia*, H.V.S. Ogden writes "At bottom Utopia is a book on ethics. It is an attempt to project Christian ethical values into a concrete social system." The Modern utopia is more of a structural shift. In "The Politics of Utopia", Frederic Jameson writes,

> "..what is crucial in Marx is that his perspective does not include a concept of human nature; it is not essentialist or psychological; it does not posit fundamental drives, passions, or sins like acquisitiveness, the lust of power, greed, or pride. Marx's is a structural diagnosis." [2]

Utopia is an essential ingredient in the progressive teleology of modernism, but this particular narrative, rather than being "grand" in the sense of monolithic as modernism is often characterized, is fractured into the many utopian sub-plots.

THE MANY UTOPIAS OF MODERNISM FROM WILLIAM MORRIS TO ROBERT MORRIS

Just as there were multiple modernities [Eisenstadt 11], there were multiple modernist utopias. These utopias were not only manifold, but also mutually exclusive. Here I will illustrate how utopia pervaded modernism by drawing on examples from across many periods and disciplines within modernism. I have organized these examples into opposing pairs that will also serve to demonstrate the contestation between different modernist visions of utopia. I will have to rely on some knowledge on the part of the reader of each of the examples below as there is not space to describe each in detail. Rather, I will tease out the relevant utopian strain of each by way of illustrating the larger arc of utopianism in modernism.

THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY

William Morris (English, 1834-1896). Original Design for "Tulip and Willow" Pattern, 1873. Pencil and watercolor on paper. 114.3 x 94 cm.

In 1890, William Morris published "News from Nowhere", the utopian manifesto of the Arts and Crafts movement ("nowhere" refers to the literal meaning of utopia in Greek as "no place".) Arts and Crafts was a cultural and social reaction to the industrial revolution and the alienation between the worker and their labor, but Arts and Crafts was also responding to an earlier shift from the beginnings of the modern era in the eighteenth century; the citizen being displaced from the land. Kevin Hetherington wrote of this period in *The Badlands of Modernity*,

"Many people were being removed from the land and from their villages and forced to become vagrants and migrants, known in the discourse of the

time as 'masterless men'….Old patterns of rights and duties as well as one's place in an established social hierarchy were no longer certain." [58]

Arts and Crafts proposed re-joining people to their labor (through a return to hand-crafted goods exchanged on a small scale in a barter system) and to the land (through use of natural forms and materials and a return to village/communal living). One might characterize such a pastoral vision as decidedly un-modern, but Morris was heavily influenced by Marx in positing a structural utopia and of course, in a pre-modern agrarian society, there would be no need for this type of "back to the land" vision. In responding to the crisis of modernity, Arts and Crafts was inherently modernist.

Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, Bronze, 1175 x 876 x 368 mm

While Britain was home to the industrial revolution and to the Arts and Crafts movement, Italy entered the twentieth century catching up, needing to prove that it too had industry, that it too was modern. Into this context was born Futurism with the publication of the "Manifeste du futurisme" in 1909 by Italian poet and painter Marinetti. The Futurist manifesto embraced the conditions of urban and industrial living and the aesthetics of speed and violence as uniquely modern. As an intellectual avant-garde, Futurism gave rise to spectacular art works such as Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. While Futurism helped define twentieth century modernism, it's glorification of violence, war, and it's call for a new ordering of society positioned it as a building block for fascism and Marinetti was active in Italian fascist movements until the 1930's. Since the catastrophic events

of the first half of the twentieth century, it may be difficult for us to understand any fascist vision

as also utopic, but S.N. Eisenstadt wrote of social protest movements within modernism,

> "They transformed, in the modern setting, some of the major heterodoxies of the axial
> civilizations, especially those heterodoxies that sought to bring about….the realization of
> certain utopian visions. Most important among the movements the developed during the
> nineteenth century and first six decades of the twentieth were the liberal, socialist, or
> communist movements; they were followed by two others, fascist and national-socialist,
> building on nationalist prejudices." [9]

And, while Arts and Crafts was modern, it may be the darker of these two utopias that is the more

modern in its embrace rather than rejection of the conditions of modernity. Hetherington writes of

pastoral utopias,

> "All of these experiments in were in some ways a critique of aspects of modern life, but it
> is the embedding of the utopian ideal within the very conditions that these experiments
> sought to escape that is the most important means through which notions of utopia came
> to be expressed within modernity, indeed helped to shape the very expression of
> modernity itself." [65]

TRANSCENDENTALISM AND INTER-SUBJECTIVITY, RESPECTIVELY

Jackson Pollock in his East Hampton
studio, summer 1950. Photograph:
David Lefranc/Corbis Kipa

Not all utopic impulses need to be political, in fact, from Thomas More's *Utopia* onward, politics is the most common thing banned from utopia. Here I propose Abstract Expressionist painting, as articulated in the writing of Michael Fried, and Minimalist art, exemplified by the artwork of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, as competing visions that sited utopia in transcendental and inter-subjective consciousness, respectively. Some might argue that Minimalism heralded post-modernism and should not serve as an example of a modernist utopia, but in *The Return of the Real*, Foster argues convincingly that Minimalism both breaks with late

modernist art and revives early modernist art and is thus reciprocal and integral with modernism.
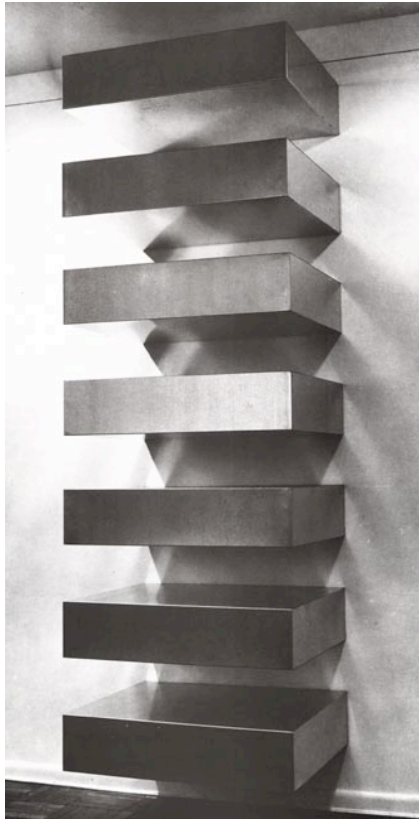
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1966. Galvanized iron, 7 units, 9 x 40 x 31 in. each

In "Art and Objecthood", wherein Fried upheld Abstract Expressionism and took aim at Minimalism, he argues that great art should exhibit a quality he called "presentness" and be "at all times wholly manifest". He believed that a state of grace came from this type of suspension of time where the past is hidden, the future unknown, and there is only an eternal present. He contrasted "presentness" with an opposite condition that Minimalist sculpture shared with theater that he called "presence". Presence signaled not only a kind of theatricality, but also a sense of time in which the artwork is not manifest in an eternal moment, rather it unfolds, bit by bit, in real, mundane, time. In other words, Abstract Expressionist art is cast as existing wholly unto itself without contingencies, whose monumental condition viewers might clamber upon to attain ascendancy, while Minimalist art came into the viewer's space almost gesturally, like a hand reaching out in acknowledgement of the viewer's subjecthood. Judd, writing about his own work and that of his compatriot, Robert Morris, provides further evidence of the new subjectivity, "…Anything spaced on a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something, something in its surround, which suggests an object of figure in it's space…that's the main purpose of painting." [2] Judd wanted to avoid this kind of figure/ground relationship and thus the parallel hierarchical relationship of artwork/audience, aiming instead for a more egalitarian space. Judd continues, "Three-dimensional work usually doesn't involve ordinary anthropomorphic imagery." [5] emphasizing again that there is no figure inside and thus closer

to the art, no imaginary hero in the story, but rather the work exists in our space in recognition of our presence; we get to be the protagonist.

Judd helped articulate a new subjectivity delivered through phenomenology that addresses the subjecthood of all viewers. This tactic was mistaken by Fried as anti-utopian, even plebeian, but it is so only when seen through the lens of Fried's transcendentalism. In fact, both Fried's and Judd's models were utopian but they differed on a tactical level. The formal tactic of repetition of equal masses in Judd's *Untitled 1966* models egalitarian and non-hierarchical relationships that reinforce the inter-subjective relationship established between the work and viewer. These repeated shapes present ontological sameness, but at the same time epistemological difference; each is the same as others, but different because of their relative position, angle, order, view, etc. This difference is non-specific, but it indicates a situation in which one can have difference without hierarchy; utopia needs no charismatic leaders. *Untitled 1966* also exhibits a perfection of form that seems to echo the ideal society or consciousness of utopia. But I would not argue that this perfection of form is a revival of Greek ideals of the reconciliation of the complexity of the world in geometry. Rather *Untitled 1966* points to the perfection of the void, and the hollowness of the shapes that so disturbed Fried merely suggest a different kind of utopia. More on that later.

MODERNISMO Y ARQUITECTURA

Catedral de Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer, architect, Brasilia, Brazil

The term "modernismo" (modernism) was coined by Latin American poet Ruben Dario [Craven 24] and if modernism had a soundtrack, it would surely be put to the Bossa Nova, so it should come as no surprise to find utopia on a plateau in the middle of Brazil. From 1956 to 1960 the Brazilian team of Lucio Costa, urban

planner, and Oscar Niemeyer, architect, built the city of Brasilia to be not just the new capital of Brazil, but the 'capital of the year 2000' – a city of tomorrow from which to govern the ideal society.

> "It was the spectacular creation of a modern utopia: in the heart of a continent, built from scratch with daring architecture and urban planning, arose a city like no other. Unveiled almost half a century ago, Brasilia astonished the world. Brazil's purpose-built capital of perfect grids and avant garde buildings exuded wonder and optimism, control and beauty." [Carroll]

In modernism, architecture and the city become not just signifiers of utopia, but its ideal manifestation. Hetherington writes that from the start of modernity, "To be able to order space was to be able to order society….It is the architect who becomes the shaper of society." [62] And the modernist order was utopian. Mark Lewis writes of modernist architecture, "If we accept that we are modern and that we continue to live in the time of modernity, then we know that modernist representational forms have staked their legibility and 'success' in the figuring of other futures, necessarily utopian, in the possibilities of modernity." [3]

Jack Colker Union 76 gas station, William Pereira, architect, Beverly Hills, CA

I would like to pair Brasilia's high-minded nationalist utopia with another form of architecture that provides less of an opposite than my earlier example pairs, but still a very different implementation of modern urban utopia – Googie. Googie architecture is an American vernacular style that rose along the roadsides of twentieth century southern California. Unlike Brasilia, Googie buildings are not centrally planned, but controlled only by the invisible hand of commerce and they are not laid out along uninterrupted plazas, but along the crowded commercial strip. However, like Brasilia, Googie architecture exhibits the clean lines of modernism that eschew the baroque excesses and expensive, labor-intensive details of elitist pre-modern architecture and speak instead to materials and forms mass-produced 'by everyone and for everyone'. Googie incorporates the soaring, cantilevered

forms that are possibly only with modern materials and that turn any hamburger stand or car wash into a secular cathedral that dreams upward of space, of better things to come. In *Googie Redux*, Alan Hess writes about the Googie diner, *Ships*, "For twenty-six years, you could see the future at the corner of Wilshire and Glendon in Los Angeles's Westwood Village." [22] It is not only through a shared vocabulary of processes, forms, and materials that Googie paralleled the utopian vision of modernist architecture; Googie furthered this project through a humble egalitarianism that delivered this vision to the masses where they lived.

> "Ships was a people's palace, one of hundreds of coffee shops and drive-ins built nationwide during the fifties and sixties. Together they established the technological image and reality of Modernism in the lives of the mass public. They fulfilled the revolution of Walter Gropes, Frank Lloyd Wright, Miles van deer Roche, and Le Corbusier, the Futurists and the Bauhaus." [Hess 24]

THE MODERN IN CONTEMPORARY UTOPIA

Now I would like to consider contemporary utopian visions and their relationship to modernist utopias, including what specific ideational elements and praxis the contemporary may revive or reject from those earlier visions. It may seem odd to talk about contemporary utopias by looking backward, but I'm interested in learning what the contemporary revival of modernist utopias, specifically, says about us now, "..choosing *this* period rather than *that* one as a foil or mirror to the present now becomes a major element of definition for that particular present…" [Antoine 6] In order to characterize the contemporary utopian impulse; it's diversity of form and its reach, I will, again, offer examples from a variety of culture industries including fine art, television, and furniture. However, these examples will not be presented in squabbling sibling pairs because, I argue, how utopias relate to one another is one of the differences between modernist and contemporary utopias. Before I get to those examples, I first need to answer some questions implicit in my narrative; why is utopia being revived now? Why not 25 years ago? Moreover, when exactly did the modernist utopian impulse end to make room for the

contemporary? Where did the break occur?

What happened was that post-modernism intervened. Starting in the 1960s, post-modern movements, including Feminism, Post-colonialism, and Queer Studies among others, dismantled the "master narrative" of modernism, including its utopian strain. They showed, for instance, that modernist utopias were often corrupt and hypocritical; they purported to be inclusive, but were instead created by and, more importantly, delivered to a privileged few. Many were built on the apparatus of war while others were explicitly war mongering. One of the most celebrated, and pacifist, modernist utopians, R. Buckminster Fuller, posited a utopian teleology that was created by select genius-inventor-heroes and that extended directly from the technological developments of war time [Fuller 7]. Recalling the last examples of modernist utopia from above serves to illustrate the unfortunate accuracy of the post-modern critique - Brasilia is known by the nickname "fantasy island" because, while the city center remains beautiful and heavily policed, the outskirts and surrounding townships are infamous cradles of poverty and crime [Carroll]. Googie architecture also failed to model an urban utopia and, by catering to a future built around the car-machine, instead contributed to the worst urban sprawl and freeway architecture the world has seen (even Disneyland, built from this same freeway culture, scuttled their "Autopia" ride when they re-designed their internal utopia, Tomorrowland, in 1994.)

The post-modern critique of modernism in general might be characterized, generally, as pointing out modernism's inability to recognize *difference* and modernist utopianism was no exception to this. Jameson claims that all utopias are necessarily de-personalizing and de-subjuctifying [Jameson 4] and modernist utopias were internally "totalizing" in conceiving of their constituents as an ungendered, apolitical, undifferentiated mass. Modernist utopias were totalizing in another way too; they could not even recognize difference between themselves. Each modernist utopia was an all-or-nothing proposition that left out the option of mixing the best of each of them and in fact put them on collision courses with

each other that might have ended them even without the post-modern intervention. For instance, the Arts and Crafts movement could not survive if capitalism required an ever-expanding frontier that would be forever knocking, and then smashing in, the gates of Eden. Capital of course does not even respect national boundaries as evinced by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the current transformation of China. The Eden of Arts and Crafts was situated within the same nation that birthed industrialism; it didn't stand a chance. Futurism was so obviously totalizing that it helped spawn Fascism in an effort to re-order society by force along it's intellectual trajectory. On more ethereal levels, Michael Fried could not reconcile his brand of utopian transcendental modernism with the inter-subjective utopia of the Minimalists. Brasilia could not share the same space with competing structures of urban life and had to be built anew on 'blank Earth' for it's grand plazas to provide uninterrupted visions of futuristic buildings and endless horizons.

The post-modern intervention is perhaps better described as a filter for the modernist utopian impulse than an absolute rupture with it. While post-modernism suspended the project of actively constructing utopia in favor of a massive de-construction, contemporary culture is not simply reviving the utopian project from where the moderns left off, but re-shaping it as inflected with the intervening history and lessons learned, as we will see. And there are other contributing factors to the timing of the contemporary revival of utopia that are worth mentioning here.

It should be noted that, even during the post-modern de-construction of modernism – in fact, especially during that time – there was a popular fascination with late modernism in the form of TV shows like *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* in the 1970's, not to mention the 50's fashion revival during the 80's. However, that form of revival was conservative (as the post-moderns were tearing apart the modernist project, conservative forces clung to it all the more) and regressive (in casting the past as a less complicated and *better* civilization than contemporary society). In the 1950's, the

conservative/regressive social forces of late modernism idealized their own past, the 1910's, with a litany of retro-feel-good films set in that era; *Mary Poppins, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, Meet Me in St. Louis, On Moonlight Bay*, etc. So too did the conservative forces of the 70's and 80's idealize the "Happy Days" gone past. Mark Lewis characterizes this form of revival as conservative, "Central to the idea of a relation to antiquity is the sentiment that things were decidedly better before…In the political sphere, modern religious ideologies that have at their heart some previous perfect form of organization play out what is in fact only a simulacrum…" [10] In contrast, today's revival of late modernism is more selective; celebrating certain aspects of modernism and problematizing others (keep *Happy Days* in mind during my discussion of the contemporary TV show *Mad Men* below). Most importantly, what contemporary progressive forces seek from the past of modernism is not refuge from today, but the spirit of *futurity* that the moderns embodied so well.

Lastly, even post-modernism was unable to prove the modernist project entirely bankrupt with regard to utopia. It seems possible today to separate from modernism's strict teleology the sense that things can get better and to distill out of modernism's totalizing utopias an underlying universality. Modernism proved progressive in abolishing widespread millennia-old institutions like state-sanctioned slavery and establishing new secular institutions of critique such as public schools and libraries, legal courts, and museums [Eiesenstadt 14]. Those examples can be themselves problematized and are sometimes guilty of upholding a new, modern, status quo but Julia Kristeva points out that modernism has an inherent aspect of self-critique [1-19] and others attest to how the institutions of modernism help to further that critique. Foucault described museums as heterotopias where new models of thinking can be developed [4], and Paul Willis writes about the subversive potential of schools, "…the school may work, for some social groups, not through it's homologies with other parts of the social system, but through it's *differences*." [57]

FORMS OF THE CONTEMPORARY UTOPIAN IMPULSE

Here, I will present examples the contemporary utopian impulse manifest in diverse cultural forms in order to demonstrate the existence of a contemporary revival, it's breadth, and it's tactical relation to modernist utopias. My thinking about the nature of this revival is heavily indebted to Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. Specifically, Foster is able to separate two modes of engaging the past, *retroversion* (the regressive forces I outlined above) and *retroaction* (which, I argue characterizes the contemporary utopian). *Return of the Real* explores the complex relationship of the modernist avant-garde, mainly that of the early 20th century, to the neo-avant-garde of the 1960's,

> "I propose that the significance of avant-garde events is produced in an analogous way, through a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction. Taken together, then, the notions of parallax and deferred action refashions the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern." [xii]

I would like to similarly position modernist utopias with regard to the contemporary impulse. I said I was not going to present my contemporary examples in opposing pairs as I did with the examples of modernist utopias. However, I'm going to break that rule with just this first example below in order to illustrate the difference between retroversion and retroaction.

FINE ARTS

Reviving Visual Forms
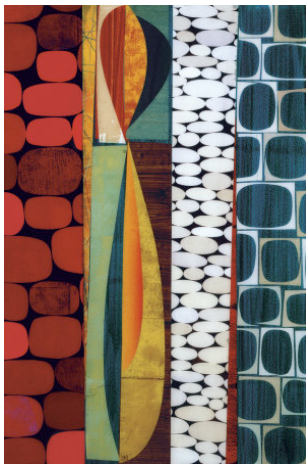
Rex Ray, a Bay Area artist, lifts visual forms from modernism in the form of abstract and asymmetrical ellipses, boomerangs, parabolas and droplets into his canvases and overlays them with textures that come straight off the walls of mid-century America; wood panel grain or sea grass. However, any radical intentionality behind those forms is stripped away as

Rex Ray, *Flamenco*, 2006, art print, 36 x 54 "

one shape is reduced to a decorative pattern within another shape, denying its operation. All the shapes and textures are engineered to be easily recognized as 'retro' and thus instantly categorized and filed away. Ray's updated, cheerful color palette differs from the "depressing" muted tones or the jarring primary colors of the moderns into an overall eye-pleasing Easter-egg pastel. It is happy, but hardly utopian. Ray revives the forms of modernist art, but not it's tactics, and the viewer is clearly aware that she is being retroverted to the past – a past with its edge removed - rather than asked to see the present differently.
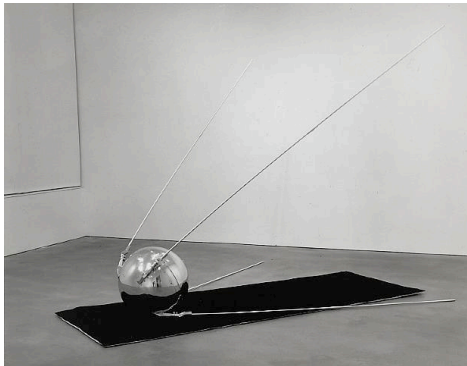
Michael Joaquin Grey, My Sputnik, 1990, titanium, kevlar, black velvet, 12 x 8 x 8'

Michael Joaquin Grey, another Bay Area artist, also lifts visual forms from modernism, but to different ends. His sculpture, *My Sputnik*, is a 1-to-1 sculptural re-creation of the Russian satellite in gleaming chrome. It's eye-pleasing, but oddly and disappointingly grounded rather than 'flying' through the gallery. By bringing an object from the past and from outside the art world into the gallery, Grey makes visible our process of aestheticizing and fetishizing modernism. *My Sputnik*, through retroacting the space race, creates an indexical link to utopian discourse, and at the same time problematizes those associations by raising the specter of nostalgia.

Reviving Pastoral Utopia

"The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world"

[Foucault 4]

In 2007, a San Francisco based artist collective, Future Farmers, began a project called *Victory Gardens* in which they re-purposed decorative green urban areas such as traffic circles or medians into useful food-producing gardens. Future Farmers used the Internet to organize labor and disseminate

training. In these gardens "victory" stood not for victory in war, but the victory of ecological sustainability. The *Victory Garden* project revived the pastoral utopia of Arts and Crafts, focusing on the local, the natural, and the ethical and on re-connecting the laborer with her work and with the land. However, *Victory Gardens* reconciled previous areas of dispute such as the use of technology and integrating the rural and the urban into a non-totalizing vision of a better society.

Ken Goldberg, Telegarden, 1996, robot, soil, 6x6x5'

In 1996, Bay Area artist Ken Goldberg, created the *Telegarden* – an Internet art project that allowed visitors to a website to control a remote robot arm that could plant, water, and tend seeds in a small plot of Earth. Visitors were required to register into the *Telegarden* virtual community and to water the plantings of others a number of times before being granted the privilege of planting a new seed themselves. *Telegarden* was utopic in the way that much net.art is, posting the Internet as a heterotopia in which it was possible to model better worlds. Specifically, *Telegarden* drove against the dystopic notions of the Internet as a technology that separates people from one another, from nature, and relieves them of responsibility by making them anonymous. The collective operation of *Telegarden* instead created a new kind of commune in which all workers knew each other and in which they took responsibility for a shared plot of Earth that seemed to exist in a utopia beyond the national borders that, in reality, separated them.

Jameson acknowledges this contemporary revival, and transformation, of pastoral utopias, "Everything that today seems outmoded in traditional utopias seeks to redress this balance – to strengthen versions of Nature that are no longer persuasive". [9]

Reviving Inter-subjectivity

As we saw earlier, one modernist path to utopia was to posit a new inter-subjectivity that

positioned art not instrumentally at the tail end of social change, but at the start of a new consciousness that could lead there. Contemporary Net.art revives Minimalism's model of inter-subjectivity and inflects it with the difference of post-modernism to retroact an old-but-new vision of utopia. In *Internet Art: The Collision of Commerce & Culture Online*, Julian Stallbrass testifies to net.art's debt to modernism, "Net art, then, is seen as an archaeology of the future, drawing on the past (especially of modernism), and producing a complex interaction of unrealized past potential and Utopian futures in a synthesis that is close to the ideal of Walter Benjamin." [48]

Radical Software Group, Carnivore, 2001, net.art

In the 2001 net.art work, *Carnivore*, the artist collective Radical Software Group took a piece of network surveillance software recently de-classified by the FBI and turned the secret spy-ware into an open-source public art work. RSG developed an API (application programming interface) for the software that directed all surveilled network data not to a private monitor but to a public website. Visitors to the website were invited to download a copy of the software along with the art group's own API and create their own works of art that were then uploaded back to the main website for everyone to see.

In 2002, Chris Basset created the *Lost Love* project, an online database where viewers are invited to type in their own story of lost love and view others' stories in a kind of virtual sympathy klatch.

Net.art embodies the notion of parallax that Foster describes as, "…the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer." [xii] and which constituted a central phenomenological tactic of Minimalism in constructing a new inter-subjective relationship between artwork and viewer. Rather than positioning the viewer in constant relative position to physical objects, net.art places the viewer at a variable remote location from which they get a customized view of the artwork based on their navigational choices. In other words, the net.art viewer can never comprehend the

entire artwork as it is always temporally and spatially displaced.

There are several other tactics through which net.art revives inter-subjectivity – by entering the social space of the viewer directly, by inviting the viewer to contribute to or complete the artwork – but here I want to focus on how net.art adapts this modernist tactic while transforming it through the lessons of post-modernism.

I have argued that Minimalism recognized the subjecthood of the viewer, but it did so in a way that did not recognize difference. The viewer of Minimalism was a subject, but an ungendered, apoliticized, undifferentiated subject. Net.art recognizes the subjecthood of the viewer by employing many of the same tactics, but it also recognizes difference in the subject because, with net.art, not only do you remember your encounter with the artwork, but *it also remembers you*. The artworks leaves its traces and imprints upon you, but you also leave your mark upon the work through your re-working of the *Carnivore* software and your own story of lost love that the artwork absorbs into its public being where it further recognizes your subjecthood by exhibiting your marks to other subjects. Moreover, the marks you leave come not from an undifferentiated mass that may simply activate or take-away part of the art – rather your contribution is as personal as you, inflected with your vision, your concerns, and your politic.

I should emphasize that this tactic does not position net.art in opposition, as "different" from Minimalism but puts it into a reciprocal and retroactive relation to it. Minimalism was criticized for being apolitical, but it's new inter-subjectivity laid the groundwork for later political art discourse such as Feminist, Queer, or Post-colonial, which added the consideration of difference that, in turn, laid the groundwork for net.art.

Considering the question of whether modernism is our antiquity, Jean Philippe Antoine proposes that whereas the ancients left physical ruins for the moderns to contemplate and/or destroy, the ruins the moderns have left to us are the ruins of media, "Because of the nearly instant conversion of circumstances into ruins achieved by the modern media, the materials of Modernity have indeed substituted other, older materials as the stuff of Culture, i.e. as potential materials for the operations of collective remembrance." [5] It is fitting, then, that we should remember modernism and revive its utopias, via its favored medium, television.

Mad Men, still from season 3, episode 3, 2009

Unlike *Happy Days*, the contemporary TV Show, *Mad Men*, problematizes mid-century modern life, depicted as glamorous, heroic, complex, and glaringly unable to recognize difference. *Mad Men* is set in the offices of an advertising firm; a place where they create the modern world, or at least spin it, every day. In an iconographic reading, the show's protagonist, Don Draper, represents the modern to his core: He has assumed a false identity that helped him attain, and through which he now lives, his charmed life. He made the modernist break with the past that was required for the modern utopia. He is a self-made charismatic maverick and loner hero (the show uses shots from a low camera angle so that characters tower over the viewer). And, in his relentless drive forward, he has little time for the "politics" of the office, ethics, or consideration of others.

Don is surrounded, and often confounded, by modernism's Others – Peggy, the prototype feminist, Sal the closeted queer, and the nameless black elevator operator who tries to maintain a respectful posture and his job while he bridles under the ad men's inane questions about what TV sets blacks prefer to buy (in an era when those sets are showing police-dogs attacking blacks in Alabama.)

These Others would not be acknowledged until later (in the timeline of the show), but *we* recognize

them now; *we* get to acknowledge their difference, we get to make up for the sins of modernism and

reconcile this glamorous dream, this gleaming utopia, with *difference*.

In the final episodes of the show's third season, Don attempts to avoid a hostile take-over of the

ad firm by joining with three other white male top execs to leave and form their own company.

However, in a shock to his self-image, and after several false starts, it becomes apparent to Don that he

needs the Others in order to succeed. He asks for help and the Others eventually join him in building this

brave new enterprise.

Unlike *Happy Days*, what is important about the world of *Mad Men* is not the world they live in,

but they world they are striving for - and stumbling into.

TASTE CULTURE

Taste culture is a matrix of everyday aesthetics, lifestyle choices, mannerisms, language, and

cultural values that interact with the economic foundations of class structures (Fussell). Taste culture is

the raw material of Michel de Certeau's *tactics* from which consumption can be turned to use,

> "In the wake of the many remarkable works that have analyzed 'cultural products', the
> system of their production, the geography of their distribution, and the situation of
> consumers in that geography, it seems possible to consider these products no longer
> merely as data…but also as parts of the repertory with which users carry out operations
> of their own." [Certeau 31]

The example of the contemporary utopian impulse I would like to provide now is drawn not from high

culture (fine art) nor from mass culture (television), but from a popular sub-culture that delights in

retroacting late modernism and its utopian strain – I mean the contemporary dealers, traders, performers,

and collectors of 'mid-century modern'. This sub-culture cuts across other demographics, from mid-

west housewives [RetroRenovation], to hipsters in San Francisco's Mission District, to Portland's Mid

Century Modern League [MCM League], amateur historical preservationists set out to preserve, among other things, Googie architecture.

One of the most common forms of this mid century revival is trading and collecting mid century modern furniture, especially that which most explicitly embodies the utopian aspirations of the moderns. One of the most popular 'cultural products' is Broyhill Brasilia, a line of domestic furniture inspired by Niemeyer's Brasilia that was produced between 1962-68 by American furniture-maker Broyhill. The 1962 Broyhill brochure speaks to the Brasilia line's utopian inspiration and aspirations,

> "On the heights of a plateau, deserted and desolate, there raises its proud head the new and majestic Capitol of Brazil, called, 'the capital of the year 2000'. The city, by its daring and beauty, has revolutionized architecture and opened vast new horizons of design. From this inspired dream, Broyhill drew inspiration for the furniture grouping which bears the fine young name: BRASILIA. In softly shaded Walnut, BRASILIA is infinitely more than a collection of fine furniture. It is the embodiment of a new way of life." [Broyhill]

Here utopia is distilled and disseminated in a coffee tables shaped like the Catedral de Brasilia or a dresser that incorporates the upended parabolas of the Palacio da Alvorada.

Catedral de Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer, architect, Brasilia, Brazil

Broyhill Brasilia Cathedral Round Table, 40x40x16, 1962

Of course, it must be admitted that this is also how utopia is also commodified and how utopian forms degenerate into "style", even kitsch. I will address these questions in the next section, suffice to say here that the modernist utopias were not always opposed to commodity capitalism and that "style" is also important and telling as a means of transmitting culture. Additionally, to claim that the mode of production unilaterally dictates the field of *cultural*

production denies the agency of the consumer/user ,

> "…the consumer cannot be identified or qualified by the newspapers or commercial products he assimilates; between the person (who uses them) and these products (indexes of the 'order' which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use that he makes of them." [Certeau 32]

So, what is the use of these objects? Besides allowing the contemporary collector to own and perform the modernist utopia retroactively, they activate current practices as well, inflected for the current moment. Using these objects forty-five years after the fact of their production puts these objects outside the mainstream of new-product capitalism with its attendant spectacle of advertising and requirement of obsolescence. Bohemian sub-cultures have often resisted capital through the tactic of "retro" [Fussell 179]. But in a more specifically contemporary way, this practice exemplifies "reduce, re-use, recycle" the mantra of ecological utopians like the Future Farmers. Their small, domestic scale allows these objects to serve of magnets for social organization from the bottom up, unlike many modernist utopias, and contemporary utopians gather around them regularly at small ad-hoc heterotopias like flea markets that bring to mind William Morris' village markets or Benjamin's Arcades. In these arenas, contemporary utopians recognize each other through codes and signs that are often 'retro-scribed' from modernist utopias like Leonardo's script that could be read only against a mirror.

These signs operate in the same way as in the much more thoroughly studied queer culture; a Broyhill nightstand or a yellow bandana in a back pocket is an attempt to speak alternative social values.

Notes from Nowhere

Now that I have argued for a genealogy of the contemporary utopian impulse, in this final section I will attempt to characterize it on its own terms.

> "Two complementary but potentially contradictory tendencies developed within this program [modernism] about the best ways in which social construction could take place. The first, crystallized above in the Great Revolutions, gave rise, perhaps for the first time in history, to the belief in the possibility of bridging the gap between the transcendental and mundane orders-of realizing through conscious human agency, exercised in social life, major utopian and eschatological visions. The second emphasized a growing recognition of the legitimacy of multiple individual and group goals and interests, as a consequence allowed for multiple interpretations of the common good." [Eisenstadt 5]

The above quote, from Multiple Modernities by S.N. Eisenstadt suggests that modernism contained two strains; one universal and utopic, the other individual, recognizing difference but not utopic. I would like to suggest a slightly different reading; that modernism contained these two seeds – the universal and recognition of difference – *both* of which would be required for utopia. The moderns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cultivated the first seed of the universal with their totalizing visions imposed on undifferentiated masses. The post-moderns of the latter twentieth century cultivated the second seed of difference, ignoring the first such that their fear of globalization and hegemony and their cultural relativism aligned them with regressive forces, as Eisenstadt notes "It is possible to identify significant parallels between these various religious movements, including fundamentalism, with their apparently extreme opposites – the various postmodern movements with which they often engage in contestation, arguing about hegemony among the different sectors of society." [20]

Contemporary utopians are attempting to reconcile the universal with difference. As I outlined earlier, the universal utopianism of the new inter-subjectivity is inflected with difference in net.art projects like *Carnivore,* and *Mad Men* marries the modern maverick with his Other. Contemporary utopias are less totalizing and more porous with each other; *Victory Gardens* with

its urban high-tech approach to the local and natural unites Futurism with Arts and Crafts.

Contemporary utopian visions are less totalizing in other regards as well. Today's utopians have

grown tired of waiting for the revolution of the workers or any other messianic and totalizing

singularity that was required for utopian projects to progress. Today's utopia proposes, instead, a

renewed effort of quick erosion on many fronts simultaneously. In this regard, contemporary

utopian art sees itself, not as the instrument of the revolution, but as a node in an array of

progressive social forces. Stallbaum offers net.art as an example,

> "The question of deeper cultural transformation is linked to the connection of
> online culture to broader social and political movements that are questioning the
> parameters of capitalism itself, not only on the Net but about environmental
> issues, sweated labour, the patenting of AIDS drugs, the mental pollution of
> advertising, and a whole range of other issues." [137]

I do not intend to characterize modern, post-modern, and contemporary utopias as if they

were Goldilocks' three bears in which the contemporary avoids the heat of the moderns,

the cold of the post-moderns, and ends up "just right". Contemporary utopianism is

characterized by reconciliation as much as retroaction, but whether this strategy works

remains to be seen. For instance, if multiple utopian visions are inter-reconcilable with

each other and perhaps even with capital, can they truly achieve anything we'd call

utopia? Or will we be resigned to a series of small victories - of ongoing heterotopias and

"mini-topias"?

CAMP UTOPIA

Earlier, I referred to certain contemporary utopian examples as commodities, even kitsch.

It is easy to see how some of the examples offered above could be argued to point not to an

earnest contemporary utopian impulse but to capitalism's genius in neutering and commodifying

utopia for ironic consumption by bourgeois hipsters. *Mad Men* is a fiction about advertising whose real purpose is…to sell advertising. Reducing Niemeyer's grandiose utopianism to a coffee table is absurd enough, and reviving the *coffee table* is perhaps reductio ad absurdum. Yes, I admit to all of this; the fetishism, the stylization; it's all there. But, in addition to those factors, there is something else at work and that something is not there despite these factors; it is tangled up in them. To help illustrate, I will tangle my arguments with the following quotes from Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp".

If the contemporary utopian impulse is in some part camp, Sontag points to the importance of taste such as camp.

> "Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason…To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free – as opposed to rote – human response. Nothing is more decisive." [1]

Camp is performativity that enables owning utopian furniture to make one utopian, "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role." [4] Camp is not the opposite of earnestness, "Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment…It only seems like malice, cynicism." [13] Sontag maintains that camp is apolitical, but here I disagree, and would invoke her own text. I believe camp is always only half-joking; that's what gives it its emotional weight and double meaning, "The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken." [5] My own arguments about mid-century furniture echo Sontag's about the retro-fixation of her period, Art Noveau, "..Such an analysis cannot ignore what in Art Noveau allows it to be experienced as Camp. Art Noveau is full of 'content,' even of a political-moral sort; it was a revolutionary movement in the arts, spurred on by a Utopian vision…" [5] It was not camp despite being political, but because it

was political; it was not camp despite being utopian, but because it was utopian. Camp is not the dismissal of the political/utopian – the two are bound up in a more complex arrangement as follows.

What the contemporary utopians love about the modern utopians is that they were earnest (Camp note 19), ambitious (Camp note 24), and tragically failed, "What it [camp] does is to find the success of certain passionate failures." [13] And they don't love the moderns ironically or cynically (Camp note 55), but sympathetically, "Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label 'a camp,' they're enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling." [13]

REAL UTOPIA

Contemporary utopians retroact modernism by continuing the utopian project that attempts to address the crisis of modernity. But given this ongoing effort, why do we never seem to "arrive" at utopia? What about it is so scary that we cannot even approach it? Kevin Hetherington writes, "Utopics does not just imply conscious attempts to create spaces of order, but insists that there is an uncontrollable process of deferral involved which means that utopias can never actually be achieved." [57] Frederic Jameson suggests another reason, "Utopia will then be characterized by the falling away of that imperious drives towards self-preservation, now rendered unnecessary…The fear with which this prospect immediately fills us is then to all intents and purposes the same as the fear of death.." [11]

To inflect Hetherington's deferral with Lacan and Jameson's fear/desire with Freud, I propose that utopia may be the same as the Real or the death-urge.

Utopia means both "no place" and "ideal place". In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the Real is the impossibility of true knowledge of other people, the existential nothingness that comes from the absence of that connection, the unattainable situation – no place [Lacan]. Yet this oblivion is also a universal condition uniting humankind, potentially inspiring the deepest empathy and inter-subjectivity – the ideal place. The Real fixes us in its gaze, offering us the chance to confront our repressed traumas and come to terms with the paradoxes they represent, be they personal (unfulfilled desire for love, sexual ambivalence, etc.) or collective (slavery, sexism, war). We must come to terms with these past traumas if we are to move on to the ideal consciousness/society. If we don't, we're doomed to relive and repeat them in other forms that we use to screen out the Real, to defer utopia. Utopian art is that which acts as the opposite of a symptom; it reveals rather than screens the Real. It can achieve this through tactics that exploit the gaps in our collective screens of social normativity or it can point directly to the Real through tactics like repetition. In *Return of the Real*, Foster describes Warhol's use of repetition, "…repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition." [132]

The Real is not something we go to live inside; rather it's the effect of the Real on the here and now and how we deal with that that is key. Perhaps this is a productive way to view utopia; it is always deferred, but the utopian impulse here and now is more important than 'achieving' utopia anyway. Judd's Minimalist works do not beckon us to some far away transcendental plane, but rather come into our space here and now. Their meaning is not inherent and separate but created contingently with the viewer. So utopia may not be some far off place, but an impulse that exists here and now whose realization is created contingently, relationally, and immediately in the space between utopia and the subject.

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