

*The "return of the living dead" is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition.*

Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 1991

"UNDEAD" and "DREAMS": the words are spelled out by two brass grids fixed close to the floor several meters apart on the wall of the exhibition space. Pixel by pixel the letters materialize in the diagonal grid of the screens, emerging slightly off-center on the reflecting surface of the material, letter by letter, to read: "UNDEAD" and "DREAMS." In order to join the two disconnected words, the viewer's eye must first overcome the spatial separation of the grids, as if physical effort were required to wrest meaning from the signs: "UNDEAD DREAMS."

Undead dreams flow through the two brass grids which, as the title of the work suggests, are the covers of ventilation shafts: *Ventilation Grills (your lost dreams live between the walls)* (2003). What is circulating here are the lost, the discarded and defunct dreams that can find no rest because they were never finally able to come to life, to cross the threshold from dream to reality. Never having been properly buried either, they have also never found their rightful place in the realm of the dead and are damned to return eternally, absent and present at the same time. They lead an intermediary existence, neither dead nor living, body and spirit separated in the interspaces of architecture, the "communicating vessels" that elude the visible world. Their only reality now is as naked signs—delegated to an anonymous material, the mechanical breath of the building, they are epitaphs of their own former vitality.

But whose dreams are these that never find reality among the living nor rest among the dead? Who is dreaming here? And what exactly is, or was, being dreamt?

Since the mid-1990s Martin Boyce's artistic work has conducted an intense and unbroken dialogue with the undead dreams of modernism—a modernism that still lives, not least since it has never been properly laid to rest. Boyce takes up its defunct and rigidified forms, dissociates and reshuffles them, continuing to speak them as a tongue that, though it may be dead, cannot be stilled. Particularly his early works draw again and again on the classics of mid-twentieth-century design, subjecting them to a sculptural mode of thought that drives a wedge between the reality of their forms and the shape of their ideas.

Martin Boyce's approach to the icons of modernism can be outright brutal. When, for example, he dismembers, breaks, or saws apart *Series 7* chairs designed by Arne Jacobsen for an entire range of works, he first of all drives the spirits out of their iconic form. He violates their idealized shape by treating the form as mere body. And in reducing the form to its naked materiality he liberates it from the cultural appropriations to which it has been subjected in the course of its history. Or, more precisely: he disengages it from its cultural fixation as a classic that ossifies it as a status symbol in an economy of connoisseurship and good taste.

The balancing of the pieces in large-scale mobiles whose fragile elegance calls to mind the work of Alexander Calder, while it translates the frag-

ments into a new form, does not heal their wounds. On the contrary, precisely because the form in its materiality is visibly destroyed and literally suspended does its reality as idea emerge at all—and it does so in opposition to the idea of its original intention. For at the same time as the form becomes material, its ruins invoke a lost (if no less ideological) horizon of ideas that has been overlaid, obscured, and canceled out over time by the object's presence as a status symbol: namely, its historical ambition as part of a democratic postwar vision of design geared to making "good form" accessible to wide sections of the population through industrial mass production.

In this sense, Martin Boyce's mobiles are iconoclastic totems that conjure up and invoke the spirits of modernism, not to reconcile them but rather to render their contradictoriness and incompleteness visible in the first place. They liberate the forms of modernism from their cultural petrifications in order to preserve their undead dreams as ideas that have not yet run their course.

And yet it would be misleading to treat Boyce's works simply as artistic commentaries on the historical discourse of modernist design. Martin Boyce is a sculptor, and emphatically so. And even if the core vocabulary of his sculptural language is drawn from the historical sphere of modernist design, this latter is clearly neither its sole reference nor the measure of his poetics.

The energy of Boyce's works stems rather from the fact that they not only exploit and reconfigure modernist forms, but that he also always corrupts the horizon that he thus invokes with its Other—that is with all that the modernist imperatives of rational planning in design and architecture, and the ideas of pure form in art, once exorcised from their respective spheres. Boyce not only invokes the undead spirits of modernism, he also contaminates their sphere of influence by inviting back into his works all the pariahs that modernism had driven out with great effort in the historical process of its dogmatization: narrative and the psychological, the popular and the paranoid, the unplanned and the quotidian. The cultural sources of this contamination are various, ranging from film and cinema, literary and pop-cultural references to traces of daily use (or misuse) inscribed on the surfaces of some of his works like scars of their former everyday lives.

Above all the figure of the grid, recurring in diverse media, forms, and constellations, highlights the dual symbolic structure that modernism assumes in the works of Martin Boyce. As Rosalind Krauss has shown in her essay "Grids," the figure of the grid is the core emblematic structure that both embodies and announces the modernity of modern art and its claims to autonomy. For the grid is all that the world is not: flat, geometrical, obeying an order of pure relationship. It is antinatural, antimimetic, and antireal. It is, in Krauss's own words, what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. The grid is the form in which modern art broke away from all worldly relations and established itself as an autonomous and autotelic sphere.

So when Martin Boyce's works make use of the figure of the grid, as for instance in *Ventilation Grills* (*your lost dreams live between the walls*) cited at the outset, he is inevitably invoking precisely this self-affirming horizon of modern art. At the same time as citing the grid as the iconic structure of modern art, however, Boyce also profanes it by charging it with all the worldly relations that the grid once banished from its sphere. Because—to stick with our example—the grid in *Ventilation Grills* is at the same time indebted to the banal function of the object that the work mimics. The covers of ventilation shafts are precisely grills that protect the openings and allow the air of an air-conditioning system to circulate. Moreover, the grills of *Ventilation Grills* serve as typographical grids on which the linguistic elements of the work materialize. So, in addition to their specific object reference that gestures beyond the self-referential world of art, they

also function as lines for writing inviting fragments of narrative back into its structure. And also the source of the grid that Boyce employs in this particular case is already tantamount to a corruption of modernist dogma. For the grid of his ventilation grills is no mere arbitrary design—its structure and slant derive from the world of cinema, namely from the title sequence of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* created by Saul Bass. Here Bass passes the titles of the film through a grid that materializes line by line obliquely across the screen and which turns out to be an abstraction of the reflecting facade of a high-rise office block as a cross dissolve reveals.

And it is as cross dissolves, or double exposures, that the grids in Martin Boyce's work appear. They invoke the figure as programmatic emblem of modern art while at the same time manifesting its Other: mimesis, narrative, referentiality. It is not as an excluding structure that they function, but rather as a net in which all that the modernist ambition banned from the visual arts gets caught, again and again, in varying configurations.

Likewise, at the hands of Martin Boyce, *Eames Storage Units*—a modular, industrially mass-produced shelf system geared to individual customizability that was designed by Charles and Ray Eames in 1949—turn into psychologically charged emblems of a modernism whose rationality seems to have gone paranoid. Boyce exploits the modularity of the design and perverts the Eamesian logic of the grid by systematically running it through a dialectic of inside and outside, of open and closed segments, of private and public space. The functionalist shelf system thus gives rise to building-like structures that have been rid of their functions, putting one in mind of the modernist dwelling machines of a Le Corbusier or their vestigial traces in late-modernist social housing. The open grid structure that ensured customizable adaptability in the modular design system turns into the claustrophobic cell of a mode of architectural thought that reduces social space to its potential for infinite planning.

The titles that Boyce lends to the works in this series add a final touch in limning the picture of a modernism gone phobic and auto-aggressive: *For 149 Fear View Lane* (2000) is the title of a module completely encased in black panels to form a mute monolith marked only by the structure of its joins; *276 Silent Falls* (2000) is the fictional address of another block on the imaginary city map of fear: painted in the primary colors red, yellow, and blue, it recalls the constructivist pictorial grids of De Stijl (which obviously also inspired the Eames designs themselves). *White Disaster* (2000), on the other hand, is an entirely white block with soot-like traces at one corner, supposedly from burning, calling to mind the painterly gesture of Robert Ryman (paint tubes clearly mixed up here). Then there is *You Are Somewhere Inside* (2000), a black version with a small number of areas on the structure's surfaces offering views in (or out), as if the constructor had only just managed to maintain a minimal contact to the outside world beyond the order of the grid.

The way in which the titles dramatize the reproduced and transformed *Eames Storage Units*, however, not only generates the phobic dimension of modernity already implicit in their construction, but invokes a further horizon of cultural projections linked with the modernist wraiths of functionalism and abstraction: the dream world of cinema, the cold, uncanny atmosphere of 1940s and '50s film noir, or the cheap horror and disaster scenarios of the 1950s and '60s B-movies. The titles thus inscribe the works on a media map of postwar America's cultural flipside whose optimistic variant was conveyed not least by design visions of a new society represented by creations such as those of Charles and Ray Eames. They are the cinematic fallout of a profoundly traumatized culture that exorcizes its fear of the Other in an era of political witch-hunts to which the name McCarthy lent its signature.



Martin Boyce casts his works as protagonists in an uncanny narrative of modernism that oscillates between the dark worlds of cinema, the abstract languages of art, and the functionalist structures of design and architecture. Taking up historical systems, he expels the idealized and ideological remnants from their forms by perverting their logic of construction and corrupting them with their excluded Other. He invokes them as a space of undead ideas and condenses them in afterimages of an unfinished (hi)story that brings to light again what they banished and repressed. Or with Žižek: Martin Boyce's works are revenants of modernism come back to exact the symbolic debt that their abortive funeral has failed to settle.