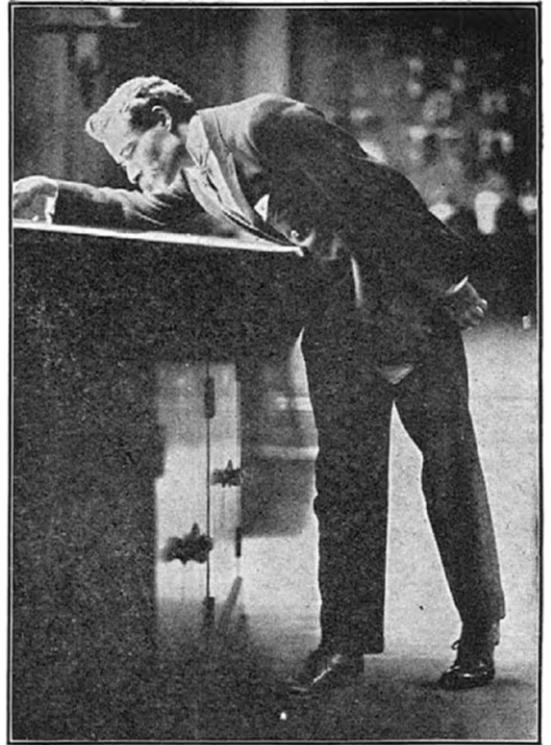


Tyler Coburn



Adam Gibbons



II. MUCH BENT

#6 Tyler Coburn in conversation
with Adam Gibbons

“ ”

Edited by Eva Wilson

London and New York
2017–2019

CHIMERAS IN DRAG

ADAM GIBBONS: Tyler! Hi. Hello.

Enough procrastination!

I'm drawn to your project *Ergonomic Futures* out of an interest quite directly connected to the premise of this series of books, which is to attend to artistic practices at the intersection of exhibition-making and forms of publishing and distribution.

This interest partly stems from an exhibition we both had a hand in making at Chelsea Space, London in the spring of 2017 called *RETROSPECTIVE with Tyler Coburn, Viola Yeşiltaç and xxxxxxxx* with the artist group Am Nuden Da (which, along with Jesper List Thomsen and Lewis Ronald, I am one third of). At our invitation, you subjected Am Nuden Da to a series of managerial exercises, the documentation of which became a book [*Catalogue Raisonné*, 2017]. Following on from that process I have been thinking a lot about the awkward legacies of conceptual art and institutional critique, hosting relations, managerial logic, and bureaucracy, both within and outside of art.

You've been working on *Ergonomic Futures* since 2016. The project manifests as bespoke museum furniture, created in

collaboration with New York architects Bureau V, employing some of the principles of the discipline of ergonomics. This furniture is made for hypothetical future human bodies, which imbues it with both a speculative form, and a mode of narrating the institutional structures that it enters. Conceived in parallel to these seats is a website (www.ergonomicfutures.com) designed with Luke Gould and Afonso Martins, which hosts writing you produced under a disparate and enigmatic set of titles such as 'Surtsey', 'Church', 'Smurf', 'Guppy', and 'Seat'.

So, coming at *Ergonomic Futures* from a fairly elementary formal level, I'm interested in how your project appears to equally occupy online and museum space, and as such situates itself in a way that can speak to the kind of networked and abstract relations that we find ourselves in today. It strikes me that a challenge facing contemporary critical art practices is to find methodologies and strategies that are capable of addressing these topics or sites or institutions in all of their complexities.

What status are the seats afforded in the museums they enter? Are they considered artworks, and therefore tended to through the curatorial and conservationist channels accorded to such objects? Or are they held with other museum furniture,

looked after by gallery managers and technicians? I assume artwork and furniture are managed in different bureaucratic systems, kept in different storage rooms, and would presumably be subject to different expectations of longevity. Is this distinction something you're interested in? And lastly, do the seats have individual titles?

TYLER COBURN: The seats don't have individual titles. Everything – seat, website – is encompassed by the title *Ergonomic Futures*. Part of the reason for this is that I want the seats to read more as furniture than art objects or the types of design objects displayed (not for use) in the Decorative Arts sections of museums. Giving individual titles to the seats might push them over the line into the art domain. Related to this is the fact that the seats, when possible, enter the furniture inventories of museums.

That said, the seats are always installed with work captions that mention the research behind them, as well as the website. The intended bodies of these seats are never described on the captions, thus inviting users to speculate about their ideal sitters in a tactile manner. If users choose to navigate the website on their smartphones while using the seats, then multiple tactile practices come into play.

GIBBONS: How many varieties of seats exist so far, and do you plan on continuing to evolve the designs?

COBURN: There are two typologies at the moment: an elongated, fractal form covered in composite wood veneer, and a squat, biomorphic mass coated with spray-on gray rubber. In the future, I would like to realise other typologies; I would also like to continue producing the existing ones. A parameter for my project is that, in any city, two copies of a given typology are produced: one intended for long-term use in a fine art museum, and the other in a natural history or anthropology museum. This allows the seats to engage the multiple disciplines of my research.

GIBBONS: Where have the seats landed to date?

COBURN: The first seat was commissioned by and exhibited in the 2016 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. One copy is now in the Seodaemun Museum of Natural History, Seoul, and the other is in the Art Sonje Center, Seoul.

The second seat was commissioned by Lafayette Anticipations – Fondation d'entreprise Galeries Lafayette in Paris and first exhibited in its 2016 group exhibition, *Faisons de l'inconnu un allié* (*Joining Forces with the Unknown*). One

copy is now installed at the Centre Pompidou, and the other at Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind), Paris.

GIBBONS: In your interview around *Ergonomic Futures* published by DIS Magazine in 2016, you often describe the project using the term 'research'. Is this connected to your wage labour as an adjunct professor? Are there other reasons for using this term? I'm thinking about the way 'research' is often commodified in higher-education environments: directing research topics to meet external funding criteria, and also through the exploitation of the cultural capital of academics. That said, I'm also thinking about the kind of *détournement* which can take place within the term 'research', whereby specialisms can be blended or repositioned towards creative, even emancipatory ends.

COBURN: Oh Lord, I just searched that DIS interview for the word 'research'. I use it A LOT.

I did an interview with Eleanor Taylor for the Kunsthalle Wien blog in 2016, and this topic came up, so I'll paste my response below. Let me preface it by mentioning that one of the classes I teach is dedicated to 'Artistic Research' methodologies. I try my best – with the help of writing by such people as Tom Holert and Renate Lorenz –

to define this term outside of the 'epistemic violence' that, according to Lorenz via Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, characterises 'the Enlightenment's merciless pursuit of knowledge production' and its attendant forms of objectification and capture [*Not Now! Not! Chronopolitics, Art & Research*, 2014].

Here's the longer response, from the Kunsthalle Wien interview, to a question about whether I consider myself a conceptual, post-conceptual, or research-based artist:

'I think conceptual art denotes a historical period, and I think post-conceptual is a modality still in search of definition. That said, I'm apprehensive at the extent to which "research-based" practices have become implicitly synonymous with post-conceptual ones. I'm ambivalent about this new classification of "research-based" artist: the way it presupposes that only certain artists are researchers, when in fact many artists do research within their practices. Moreover, there's a sense that delineating "research" as a category gives it an institutional legitimacy; we need look no further than the research PhDs cropping up (particularly in Europe) to see this trend in action.

I'm ambivalent, because obviously research is a big part of my work. As an artist

with neither commercial gallery nor market, I potentially stand to benefit from the funding offered by some of these programs. But I do worry that we're seeing the construction of a new benchmark for artistic professionalism – one that artists will eventually have to meet, if they want to pursue a teaching career.' ['Interview: Tyler Coburn', *Kunsthalle Wien blog*, May 2016]

GIBBONS: There seems to be an assumption in your work that the museum as institution will continue to exist in a recognisable material format, which implies that history will continue to be recorded and displayed along similar lines to the ambitions of the twentieth century in regards to broadly conservative methods and categories more or less held over from the nineteenth. Is this a practical consideration? Or is it a semiotic one, which presupposes the continued hegemony of forms of knowledge originating from Enlightenment and colonial ideologies, and applied socially and politically through museums and other cultural institutions?

COBURN: I don't think there's a need to divide practical and semiotic considerations here, given that the practical ambition of the project – for the seats to survive until the right bodies come along to use them – is preposterous. The designation of these

seats as 'museum furniture' is a strategy by which seats intended for future bodies can parasite the temporality performed by certain extant institutions, wherein 'timeless' objects are (often painstakingly) preserved as such. This temporality, in my opinion, is one of the forms of knowledge applied by and performed through the museum – particularly the nineteenth-century heritage model of the museum.

In short, I hope this project makes its audience question the presupposition you mentioned, given its (ironised) faith in the stability and endurance of this predominant model of museum.

GIBBONS: I'm reminded of Marcel Broodthaers and the paradox in his practice: he draws attention both to the normalising discourse of museums, in line with their bourgeois culture born out of Enlightenment values, and also, holding what may now appear to be a conservative position, to the spectacularisation of culture. As far as I can see, most of the institutions you've worked with in your project seem to reflect the traditional bourgeois values familiar throughout museum history. Nevertheless, they aren't immune to neoliberal values of expansion and popularity (visitor numbers) that most cultural institutions are now implementing through funding mechanisms (public-private partnerships, donor

access) and political influence (soft diplomacy meets middle-management bureaucratic efficiency).

I mean this in the sense of a Blairite mindset that contends, in the post-Thatcher era, that culture can be reclaimed as long as a certain amount of ground is given to corporate interests. This mentality was summed up exquisitely in a speech by Tony Blair in 1998, anticipating the opening of the Millennium Dome in London: '[I]ts content will contain a rich texture of feelings: spiritual, emotional, fun ... Exhilarating like Disney World – yet different. Educational and interactive like the Science Museum – yet different. Emotional and uplifting like a West End musical – yet different.'

COBURN: To your observation about the institutions I've worked with: if I had my way, all of my seats would end up in museums indebted to the nineteenth-century heritage model – sites where we find capital-letter discourses (and the normalising tendencies that come with capitalisation) articulating their claims: the art historical museum, the anthropological museum, and so forth. Given that my project works against such tendencies in fields like ergonomics, I see the furniture generating the most friction when sited in such institutions.

The website also does some of this critical work. Its spine-like design mimics the structure of Aristotle's 'Great Chain of Being', a vertical diagram for the heavens and Earth that is one of the oldest Western evolutionary models. What fascinates me about this rendering is that it's absolutely deterministic: everything holds a link in the chain. As a result, even the animals that cause us fear and the differently abled are not aberrant but justified by the world's order. The titles of the stories I wrote for the website appear in this chain-like form; clicking on one will unfold a story in a horizontally-linked series of texts and images. The entire website is designed to evolve. New stories may appear, and existing stories may be edited or deleted. A given story can have one or several versions that continue to change in quantity.

Methodologically, I've taken a lot from Chris Fitzpatrick and Post Brothers' writing on parasitical strategies in art. In 'A Productive Irritant', they propose the parasite as a model for engaging the dependencies and processes of value extraction that structure the art world. By entering, feeding off, or interrupting the system, an artist can expose 'the parasitical interrelations within the system itself' [*Fillip*, vol. 15, 2011]. Fitzpatrick and Post draw influence (as do I) from Andrea Fraser's writing over the

past fifteen years: for instance, her claim that '[i]t's not a question of inside or outside, or the number and scale of various organized sites for the production, presentation, and distribution of art. It is not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution.' ['From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, vol. 44, issue 1, Sept. 2005]

The parasite is a topic that I've *literally* engaged in *A Wide Blank* [2014/15], a yearlong collaboration with New York organisation Where that culminated in a gala-style dinner at a commercial gallery, in which every course and drink included an edible parasite. Our interest, in part, was to make guests recognise that there's no 'free lunch' – or dinner – in the art world. In other words, forty guests were invited to a complimentary meal hosted by an artist and non-profit organisation hosted by a commercial gallery ... and by dinner's end, they, too, became hosts.

In *Ergonomic Futures*, I'm also thinking about the dynamics of hosting – and the fact that the French word *hôte*, as per Jacques Derrida, connotes both hospitality and hostility. My seats enter institutions with an avowed purpose: to function as museum furniture. They're donated and thus can be seen as gestures

of goodwill. But they also arrive with an ulterior motive and a desire to persist in a very different way than an artefact, waiting for their function to be realised to the fullest.

GIBBONS: Is the body an institution for you?

COBURN: Hmm. I suppose if you follow Fitzpatrick and Post's host-parasite model, then it would be relevant to characterise it as such. With *Ergonomic Futures*, I'm specifically thinking about the visitor's body – and the degree to which an institution should cater to it.

GIBBONS: The categories through which you write seem a far cry from the discipline known as Human Factors and Ergonomics (or abbreviated, as per the managerial logic it is aligned to, HF&E). It is incumbent on the reader to place your writing in relation to this field, however obliquely.

Talking about the model of the parasite: through the appropriation of the term 'ergonomics', which you place centrally in framing the project, and the technical aspects of producing the seats, are you inserting your work into the field of ergonomics as a discipline or rather as a language?

COBURN: I've been interested in ergonomics for several years, and as I age and feel

the effects of decades of poor posture, I'm becoming more aware of how the objects of the designed world purport, with relative degrees of success, to accommodate our bodies. In conducting research on the field, I was surprised to learn that ergonomics was a child of Taylorism and thus tasked to increase the efficiency of the working body: to minimise wasteful movements, to keep the eye trained on its machine, to quicken the pace of materials as they race towards the market ...

Ergonomics retains an intimate relationship to labour in Henry Dreyfuss's 1955 book, *Designing for People*; Niels Diffrient's *Humanscale* publications, from 1974; and later seminal contributions to the field. The more comfortable a worker feels – at their seat, within their machine – the more productive they will be. What fascinates me is how the discipline constructs body types to serve as the measure of design. *Humanscale*, for example, includes measurements for 'standard' elderly, disabled, and obese bodies, as well as those of black, white, and Japanese descent.

While it's admirable that ergonomics considers different bodies, I wonder about the implications of these types, and how they may figure into broader social notions of normality and ability. *Ergonomic Futures* takes a circuitous