

Transformations

ISSN 1444-3775

2007 Issue No. 15 — Walter Benjamin and the Virtual

Fossilising the Commodity: Tactical Engagements with Time, Art and the Virtual in Models by Ricky Swallow

By Marita Bullock



Vacated Campers 2000
binders board, paper, glue
10 x 32 x 35 cm
Collection of Suzie Melhop and Darren Knight, Sydney

Since the mid-1990s, the Melbourne-based artist, Ricky Swallow, has created meticulously detailed 1:1 scale models of outdated mass cultural forms, all of which have been constructed from the rudimentary materials that we might find in a kindergarten – cardboard, plastic tubes, craft glue and paint. Many of the objects that Swallow has selected to model epitomise the ubiquity of the image in late capitalism and the infiltration of the commodity sign into all forms of contemporary cultural life. Most recently, he has taken particular care with outdated technologies and toys, such as the once cutting-edge 2000 Apple Power Book, the Apple Mac logo, hand-held computer games [1], ghetto-blasters, cassette tapes, a telescope, metal detector, BMX bike and Campers brand sneakers. [2] Swallow's collections of these objects belie his preoccupation with the age of the simulacrum - most principally with his referencing of the ubiquity of the virtual commodity logo over the materiality of the product, and the object's association with a boy's

backyard dreams of fantasy escapism and transcendence over the suburban banal. However this fascination with the de-materialised commodity image is invoked with a measure of irony, since Swallow's process of meticulously handcrafting commodity auras thoroughly short-circuits their former virtual life by emphasizing their excessive materiality – a materiality that, in turn, evokes the timelessness of a series of ancient fossils.

This paper traces the multiple ways in which Swallow's forms revisit debates in contemporary cultural theory, namely, questions about the commodity and its relationship to time and the virtual in postmodern art and culture. While his commodity models evoke a number of aesthetic movements from the twentieth century, namely, Duchamp's readymades, Pop Art's numerous interventions into commodity sculpture, and the commodity sculptures of Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, [3] this paper focuses on Swallow's forms in relation to critical debates relating to the cultural permutations of capitalism. I argue that Swallow's handcrafting of outdated commodities, as if they are objects unearthed from an archaeological dig, articulate a "timely" relation to Walter Benjamin's critique of the ossification of time in the modern commodity. The paper contends that Swallow's forms enact a critical distance from postmodernism's culture of retroversion and its stagnant temporality, in the way they undertake a tactical encounter with Benjamin's fossil metaphor – literalising it and rendering the commodity logo into concrete forms. In doing so, they address the ever-increasing speed of commodity obsolescence, the virtual simulations of the commodity and its collusion with the all-pervasiveness of the image, that, in Fredric Jameson's words, are characteristic features of the simulations, repetitions and retroversion of postmodern culture broadly (*Postmodernism* 17-20). [4] Mobilising Michael Taussig's theory of the tactics of mimesis which is understood as enabling a new reading of Benjamin's unmasking strategy and the analysis of time, representation and the commodity in the fossil form, Swallow's forms are understood as ironic and sincere engagements with Benjamin's dilemma of reification; they are read as mimetic subversions of the stagnation of time in the commodity, mimetic subversions that literally draw us to our senses.



Silence Kit / Upturned PowerBook 2001
 balsa wood, plaster, coloured Perspex
 61 x 139 x 52 cm
 Collection of Warren Tease and Katherine Green, Sydney

That Swallow's recently outdated commodities evoke a series of ancient fossils is a comparison that has been noted in much of the reception of Swallow's work. Marah Braye, Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson and Justin Paton have all independently argued that Swallow's recently obsolescent technologies and commodities appear like fossils excavated from an ancient civilization (Braye 562). Having been bleached of all colour and robbed of all sound and movement, their disquieting fragility recalls the distinct kind of hush that attends nineteenth-century museum cabinets. They are no longer at the forefront of electronic entertainment – the height of contemporaneity – but rather, the commodities rest, as Daniel Palmer notes, as if suspended “in a state of imaginatively short-circuited historical progression” (86). The primitive nature that is mapped into these technologies, and the mythic and archaic associations they give rise to, is further compounded by the crude and basic materials from which the models have been constructed. Paper, cardboard, glue, plastic tubes and paint are basic, elementary construction methods, just as they further emphasise the transience and ephemeral nature of all constructed forms. In their fragile, hollowed-out, fossilized life, the semiological and ideological narratives of these iconic objects are drawn out in explicit detail such that they recall Roland Barthes's writings on the mythic status of the objects of mass culture, outlined in his own iconic work, *Mythologies*.

This fossilizing gesture is most explicit in Swallow's rendition of the 2000 Apple Power Book, titled *Silence Kit/Upturned Power Book* (2001). In Swallow's rendition, the laptop's triumphant display of the cyber realm's transcendence over actuality, the commodity's final redemption from the impermanence of matter, is literally upended. Carved out of balsa wood, displayed upside down, and made to appear like an extinct piece of nature, the pattern of balsa wood grain marks the transitory nature of virtuality itself, a stark reminder of the increasing speed of commodity obsolescence.



Apple 2000 2000
edition of 12
pigmented resin
9.5 x 7.5 x 7.5 cm

This inversion of commodity dreams – the commodity's fall from immaterial, virtual transcendence to material immanence – is humorously dramatized in a related piece, in which Swallow takes the obsolete rainbow coloured Apple Mac logo out of the realm of the hyper-real and crystallizes it into 3D form. Out of the flat land of the computer screen, the old corporate logo is stripped of its spiritual glow and takes its place among the mortal world of things. Branded with the iconic, potentially biblical title *Apple* (2000), the object is left to rest among all of the other obsolescent icons of late capitalist culture that have fallen from grace – a petrified seemingly “wooden” object, patterned and layered into the multicoloured, fragmentary and ephemeral strata of archaeological time.

Swallow's BMX, titled *Peugeot Taipan* (1999) also recalls the skeletal frame of a fossilised life. Stripped of its glory and speed, it no longer heralds a “coming of age” as it once did for Swallow (*Repo Man*) – boyhood dreams of riding “off track” and exploring/colonizing the galaxy within the infinite comfort of the suburban backyard. Bleached white, robbed of its brand name stickers and reduced to a mere frame that rests against the gallery wall, the bike is resonant with the profundity and aura of an intact archaeological remnant. As Juliana

Courtesy the artist
and Darren Knight Gallery,
Sydney

Engberg notes in "No Radio," the BMX has become as spooky as something excavated from Pompeii (33).

Swallow's repeated allusions to the inevitable ruin of cultures organized around myths of transcendence are also ironically invoked in Swallow's rendition of a game boy console titled *Game Boy/Concept Model* (2000). The game boy has been smothered in barnacles, as if dredged from the depths, such that it evokes the recycled dreams of Atlantis, the sunken hopes of the Titanic and the inevitable ruin of a culture weighed down by decadence and surplus capital. The barnacled form gestures to the stagnant nature of excessive leisure time, virtual risk-taking, and invokes, with irony, the impending downfall that inevitably accompanies an all-too comfortable lifestyle. [5]

This catastrophe of comfort is also prefigured in Swallow's life-sized replicas of an empty pair of Campers brand sneakers, titled *Vacated Campers* (2000). One of the sneakers lies petrified on its side, tragic, untouched, as if it bears the precious evidence of a civilization that once walked upright, or, as Justin Paton suggests in "The Recreation Room," "the last upright step in the story of some evolutionary downfall." Eviscerated of their glow as commodities and made to appear like hollowed-out fossils, the sneakers are suggestive of the downward spiral of late capitalist society bent on consuming dreams of "upward mobility;" dreams that are ceaselessly vanquished and hollowed-out in small plastic forms. They testify to history in its most petrified form, a form of history that, as Walter Benjamin argues in *The Arcades Project*, might otherwise be described as the commodity fetish (204).

That Swallow's fossils should recall Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the commodity fossil is a timely and productive invocation given that this conjunction enables us to revisit theoretical questions relating to constructions of time and commodity culture in the context of late capitalism. Benjamin develops his metaphor of the fossil in his landmark study, *The Arcades Project*, and it is a recurring critical-poetic figure throughout his writings on modernity. [6] The fossil metaphor is invoked in order to gesture to the stagnation of historical change in Paris's culture of commodity fetishism in the nineteenth-century and in Europe in the early years of the twentieth century. He holds that the decaying commodity fetishes of the nineteenth-century, buried within Paris's dilapidated shopping arcades, are critical figures for twentieth century culture because they allude to the fossilization of time in the commodity form. The fossilized commodity is a critical image for Benjamin because it captures the stagnant nature of modernity, highlighting the ways in which nature is reified as a dead and passive construct in the bid to sell the notion of a naturally unfolding historical development, and consequently, to point to the ways in which commodity culture lulls any possibility of real historical change (204, 205, 405, 461). The once-fashionable commodities of Paris are best characterized as the shells of a mythic, ancient era



Game Boy (Concept Model) 2000
edition of 5
pigmented resin
scale 1:1
Lavery Collection, Sydney

– extinct pieces of nature unearthed by an archaeological dig. As Susan Buck-Morss argues in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Benjamin's fossil metaphor illuminates the narcotic-like effect of the commodity and its inducement of a profound form of amnesia that enables the perpetual worship of the ever-same as the ever-new (95-6, 80). It is a potentially critical image capable of performing a withering optic upon modernity's phantasmagoric illusions of endless progress, highlighting the ancient, utopian longings for real historical and social change that lies dormant within the commodity form – the seeds of change that are ceaselessly buried in the parade of endlessly new commodity fetishes (106-9).

Swallow's active process of fossilizing commodities stages a timely invocation of Walter Benjamin's critical-poetic critique of the commodity fetish. Like Benjamin's metaphor, Swallow's arrested commodities critically frame the way that capitalism freezes time in its process of creating endlessly new commodities. However whilst Benjamin's fossil metaphor alludes to the stagnation of history in modernity's worship of the ever-new commodity, Swallow's forms mobilize the fossil in order to critically frame the icons of late capitalism specifically. They extend Benjamin's critique of the commodity fossil into the temporal logic of late capitalism, replete with its orientation around the virtual logo as commodity par excellence, and its dizzying temporal logic of ceaseless reproduction, retroversion and the deferral of presence. [7] That is to say, they diverge from Benjamin's critique with regard to the context in which they are situated because what is off-set in Swallow's renditions is not simply an unmasking of the stagnation of history and time at the very heart of modern progress, but the stagnation of history and time in the ceaseless movement of late capitalism's virtual flows, the evisceration of matter in the commodity, and the increasing speed of the product's obsolescence. Indeed, if late capitalism is the culture of speed and the conditions of altered visual perception and stability, as Paul Virilio characterizes it in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (60), the accelerated pace of commodity culture is what is at stake in Swallow's critique of time in the commodity, since it is the speed of change in late capitalism that allows things to remain the same. This paradoxical stagnation, crystallization and fossilization of time in the speed of late capitalism's change is alluded to and critiqued in Swallow's forms. The commodity's complete stasis, and the way its frozen appearance is evocative of ancient fossilised matter, finally short-circuits the speed of commodity obsolescence and alludes to the process of fossilisation that occurs in late capitalism's culture of obsolescence.

The timeliness of Swallow's invocation of the commodity fossil in relation to the virtual commodities of late capitalism is certainly pertinent if we hold to Susan Buck-Morss's argument that the increased speed of commodity obsolescence, and the dwindling possibility of an outside to the fluid, nomadic principles of late capitalism, has only served to exacerbate the stagnation of history (339). If some seek to claim radical deferral and reproduction of late capitalism as an avant-garde form of temporality that finally ruptures the stagnation of modernity, Buck-Morss argues that the celebration of radical deferral (which she also associates with postmodernism as a cultural and temporal moment, and deconstruction as a theoretical movement [8]), may prove to be the weightiest fossil of all time (339). For while "deconstruction" was presumed to be both "anti-ideological and philosophically radical" in its denial of a fixed point in the past, and in its capabilities of drawing the present emphatically into interpretation, Buck-Morss argues that these deconstructive readings of Benjamin's critique of modernity also play into the logic of the commodity fetish (339). That is to say, radical temporal deferral is part of the logic of late capitalism. Buck-Morss writes:

Deconstruction cannot bring to a standstill what is experienced as a continuous restlessness of meaning, because there is no image of the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility to arrest thought. In the absence of any "magnetic north pole" whatsoever, deconstructionists "decenter" the texts as a series of individualist and anarchist acts. Change appears eternal, even while society remains static. Its revolutionary gesture is thereby reduced to the sheer novelty of interpretations. Fashion masquerades as politics (339).

Swallow's fossilizations of late capitalism's objects are timely because they historicise this conflation between postmodernism's radical deferral, and late capitalism's speed that Buck-Morss identifies as the prevalent form of time in late capitalism. Swallow's fossilized commodity icons allude to the utter stagnation of time in late capitalism's ceaseless turnover of commodity images, whilst forging a critical distance from the commodity sign. By crafting recently outdated commodity fetishes as though they are ancient fossils, we are encouraged to view the ubiquity of the commodity sign, and its colonization of all cultural realms, as if we inhabit a later cultural moment – as if this postmodern impasse in history has, in fact, passed.

This preoccupation with the markings of time in late capitalism is not only the subject of Swallow's work, made explicit in the content of his forms; Swallow's interest in the markings of time are also literally impressed within their method of production. Constructed from a method of hand craftsmanship that is time consuming to the highest degree, this method of commodity production is also nearly pre-historic in its own right, since it hails from a pre-industrial era that might also be thought of as a nearly fossilized moment in the method of commodity production. The eons of contact time carefully impressed within the painstaking detail of each handcrafted object sets up a sharp paradox in relation to the evisceration of time that is part and parcel of the content of Swallow's forms, namely, his collections of commodity fetishes. The models oscillate around an ironic disjunction between the speed with which late capitalism renders its commodities obsolete, and the enormous amounts of contact-time – the care and labour – that is required to make these objects look *démodé*. By *labouring upon* the discrepancy between the acceleration of time in late capitalism (the ceaseless turnover of the commodity image) and the leisurely pace that the hobby craftsman works at in order to make concrete objects, Swallow's forms enact a literal slowing down of time; his tactile reproductions invoke Benjamin's dilemma of reification with both a sense of irony and sincerity – they encourage us to witness the speed with which late capitalism divorces us (both literally and metaphorically) from our "senses." They encourage us to exercise the critical faculties that are imbued in touching and being in contact.

Swallow's primarily tactile encounters with late capitalism's fossils allude to another way, and perhaps a more critical way, in which Swallow's forms extend Benjamin's fossil critique into late capitalism's commodity sign. His emphasis on the process of constructing the objects supplements Benjamin's primary methodology of the fossil, namely, its orientation around the appropriation and decontextualisation of derelict objects and commodities, and in doing so, it signals a highly "crafty" and nuanced approach to the logic of reproduction that inheres within Benjamin's commodity fossil. Swallow's act of foregrounding the replication process as the pivotal aspect of the fossil form draws forth a highly nuanced engagement with the logic of reproduction and the politics of unmasking that lies dormant in Benjamin's critique of the commodity fetish. His reproductions of fossilized nature animadvert any idealization of an unfettered nature that can be unmasked by appropriating a methodology of rupture, arrest and shock. Rather, by literalising Benjamin's fossil metaphor, Swallow's forms revisit the complex nature of "matter," critical distance, and its relationship to ideology critique whilst also complicating social constructionist theses – many of which hold that the culture of the copy lives without an original base from which to ground a Marxist form of critical distance.

Swallow's revisitation of the complexities of matter and its relationship to theories of representation and ideology critique can be articulated in light of the dynamic and critical potential of mimesis, which is, according to Michael Taussig's study *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) a mode of literal or realist representation which is capable of critically illuminating the frozen dialectical tensions between nature and culture, matter and the virtual, the original and the copy, that inhere within all forms, including the commodity. Drawing and extending upon Walter Benjamin's writings on the commodity, including his essays "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "On the Mimetic Faculty," and "The Doctrine of the Similar," Taussig theorises mimesis as a form of realist representation that has the capacity to illuminate the unresolved dialectical tensions through which the commodity is ceaselessly fetishised and de-

