

Exquisite Grammar.

The well-known surrealist parlor game of the cadavre exquis resonates through the production of art over the last 100 years. It can be found in the mid-century literary cut-up techniques of William Burroughs as well as the early 21st-century glitch pop-music mash-ups of *Girl Talk*. The lasting interest lies in the aesthetic shock that can result from distinctly different elements sharing the same space and forging new associations in the combination. Figures, concepts, materials that would naturally never be found together end up having strange disturbing relations. An important aspect of this technique is the necessity of the disjunctive joint. The exquisite corpse is not a new life; it is not a new being fused into a seamless continuity. It needs to remain open to the possibility of dismantlement— or, more importantly, new recombination. Its power is fleeting, momentary, always threatening to come apart literally at the seams.

One significant condition underlies these combinations. The information shuffled and recombined must share a medium of exchange, a common playing field. This could be written language, drawn lines on paper, or digitally sampled sound, but without this shared space, the technique will not work. Although the work of the exquisite corpse project is a decidedly early 20th-century experiment, there is an important moment 70 years prior that speaks to a root not commonly associated with surrealism or avant-garde modernism. The precedent I refer to here is the publication of Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1856.

What would a publication of traditional ornamental patterns associated with the Arts & Crafts movement and Victorian interior decoration possibly have to do with the experimental bashing of conventions developed through the random cut-up?

It is in the medium of the publication of a book and the methods of representing these ornamental motifs that we find an answer. By drawing all these patterns from all (known) cultures and all times in the same manner, at a similar scale, and publishing them together as series of plates, Jones levels the playing field. These ornaments that previously had completely different material realities (carved stone, molded ceramic, painted plaster, woven tapestries, tiled mosaics...) were now all colored, flat, drawn patterns on a single sized printed plate. There was now a shared medium of exchange, and also a single source through which one could extract, sample, and recombine. It was books such as *The Grammar*, as well as the international exhibitions such as those in London, Paris, Vienna, Philadelphia, and Chicago, that aided the late 19th-century eclecticism of style. And it was these historical Frankensteins that led early modernism to respond with attempts to find a new style, a style free of national or traditional associations, in line with the electrified, mechanized, abstract new age.

The style of the machine as a rationally streamlined engineered aesthetic was soon seen to have its own assumptions and limitations. The Surrealists took a different approach in relation to modernity. They realized that the *action* of the machine was that of "the great arbitrary cut generator". Machines cut the world into discrete fragments; bits of material and bits of time. This attitude has carried through to contemporary composition, aided now through the digital cut that can compress any recorded visual or aural piece of information into a bit of data available for shuffling and recombination.

Our interpretation of the *Exquisite Corpse* concept looks backwards and forward from these histories. A 'Brethouwer cone' was divided into four sections. For each section an ornamental motif was selected at random from the twenty examples in Jones's original publication. They are Egyptian, Chinese, Moresque, and Indian. These patterns became the starting point for the development of new motifs built as low reliefs into the surface of the cone. Each pattern was given to a different individual who designed a new articulation as a three-dimensional ornament. The only guides were the overall profile cone contour and eight points of shared alignment along the seams between. Other than this the individual designers worked with no knowledge of what the others were

developing. The further implications of this procedure are that with 5 cones total, all 20 ornamental motifs could be addressed. The interchangeability combined with the ease at which the digital model medium could shuffle, begins to suggest further possibilities for developing alternate cone cadavers.

Once the geometries of the patterns were complete, the question of material fabrication arose. As mentioned above, one of the things that *The Grammar* removes from the patterns which it documents is the material conditions of their creation. In considering how one might reignite a material aspect to the fabrication it was decided on four material qualities for the object: cardboard, gold, strawberry, jellyfish, selected randomly from a list of materials. The four materials were shared by the four designers of the four slices, creating a different kind of relational overlap through the entire object. The object is digitally fabricated from a single gypsum powder material, but the interest here is in the ability of digital fabrication to allude to other materials through color, texture, and surface finish.

The resulting work *Exquisite Corpse* is a physical recombination and mash-up of a history of the culture of ornamentation, invigorating a lineage that lingers just below the surface in contemporary design culture.

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