



A Theory of Emergence

Tony Conrad discovers more than just kitsch in the exuberant trash art of Laura Kikauka

I remember very clearly that this lady was clad in velvet and fur...She took me by the hand and we passed through several rooms; then she opened the door of a chamber where an extraordinary and truly fairylike spectacle met my gaze. The walls were literally invisible, so covered were they with toys. The ceiling had vanished behind an efflorescence of toys which hung from it like marvelous stalactites. On the floor was hardly a narrow catwalk to place one's feet upon. It was a whole world of toys. [1]

As in Baudelaire's early recollection of his encounter with the strikingly dressed woman, there is a kind of simple magic that greets a visitor to a Laura Kikauka installation: the frosty frisson of late modernism is supplanted by a playfulness so universally engaging that it throws the sophisticate, while it charms the child. Follow me into *Exactly the Same, but Completely Different*, Kikauka's 2002 installation at the Power Plant, in Toronto.

Other people are laughing involuntarily as they enter, laughing at the shoes on the wall with lamps in them; there is something to see with wonder everywhere. A small child enters the exhibition, accompanied by her mother. It is patently clear from the get-go which one of them is driving their pathway through the show. The daughter is transported from the first moment by a tumbling succession of quirky and colourful teases:

a pipe-cleaner doll with googly eyes
 a cascading fringe of nylon stockings
 a pair of slippers, each containing a large plastic ear
 everywhere an impasto of feathers, baubles, beads, bangles, sequins

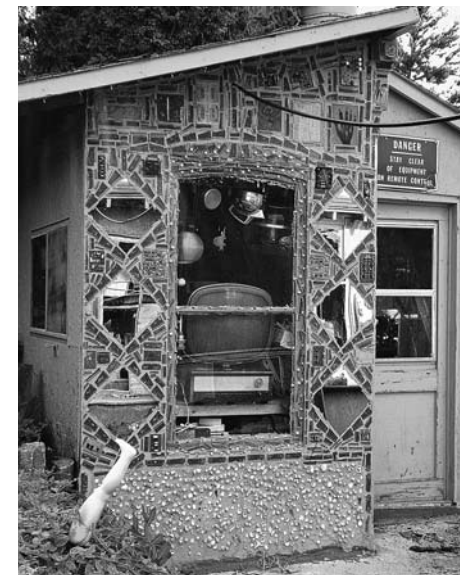
lamps made of a pair of shoes with Halloween fingers protruding through the open toes, where candelabra bulbs flicker
 a tiny pair of sandals, also lamps, with bulbs protruding where legs should be
 packages upon packages of nylon stockings, tights and pantyhose, with advertising images of ladies in states of undress posing, waving their legs
 a sign reading COME IN, WE ARE CLOSED
 a row of suspended plush animals
 an acupuncture chart for feet
 a fuzzy pink lamp, formed of pink gloves and pink shoes
 a queen-of-the-fairies doll
 a plastic ice-cream cone
 a toy toilet
 plastic fruit and toy kitchen products
 insoles made from some kind of felt or fuzz that's spilling out everywhere
 a small plastic wrestler doll
 everything, everything glued and encrusted
 googly eyeballs
 a small plastic monkey
 fart gags
 a photo of Kikauka herself in her hyacinth garden, in a frame of silk flowers
 a little fabric box with a necklace hanging in it
 flowery, vivid, colourful, clashing wallpaper everywhere behind everything
 a small translucent shoe, of Lucite; too small for anybody
 a chair completely covered with shaggy pink fake fur
 a bizarre appropriated portrait painting of a man whose eyes have been replaced by winking lights
 a typesetter's box loaded with a hundred or more assorted electronic objects, such as batteries, capacitors, disconnected connectors, springs, mystery electronic parts and robot dolls
 another box, in the shape of a house, containing a collection of tiny, tiny plastic TV sets and other miniature household items and appliances
 the ceiling, papered with lightbulb containers
 photos of even *more* densely impacted spaces from Kikauka's past—framed by fringes of plastic seahorses, by pompom tufts in aqua, by spangles and fringe in violet, pink and orange
 a shelf covered with contact-paper images of piles of fruit

lamps formed from old lightbulbs, enmeshed in skeins of silicone glue and many small objects
 a lamp that appears to have been eaten by a plastic fish
 a lamp that looks like a tiny throne of orange pompom puffs
 a lamp that rises on a stalk of chicken feet, with a base made of a dozen plastic pistols
 a little model house with a peephole that, Alice in Wonderland-like, reads LOOK—and inside, a miniature illuminated scene
 on the ceiling, many old-fashioned artsy shots of naked women with flowers, statuary, tall vases and fruit
 cockeyed shelves full of dog pictures and leprechauns
 kewpie dolls and rustic Swiss chalets, set with homey German doggerel
 plates enhanced with pink pompoms
 a dangling plastic chicken foot glued together with a skein of plastic tendrils and plastic fruit, plastic animals and plastic straws
 a shelf lined with pompom balls and fuzzy fringe on a glistening purple, diffraction-grating settee table
 a green cloth snake
 the orange room
 a sign that reads ORANGE YOU GLAD
 a row of flickering and flashing custom-built electronic units
 electronic lips that talk
 a bottle filled with something that I can't even identify
 encrustations of beads and rhinestones
 a sign at the base of a lamp that reads UGLY in big fuzzy letters
 another lamp that reads PRETTY
 a pack of Edison cigarettes
 fuzzy white globes of cloth pasted with googly animal eyes
 a kitschy picture of a woman whose clothes come off as it swings back and forth
 a boxed pair of shoes labelled EATEN BY A MOUSE
 a self-portrait of Kikauka...

...WAIT! What's going on?...I'm, I don't want to...I didn't mean to be drawn in like this; this list swallows the bait whole, it turns me into the show, it's more than a simulacrum; it's a rehearsal for becoming some-

LEFT
 Laura Kikauka, "Computer Geek in Record Room"
 Funny Farm Canada, 2006,
 Medium mixed, Dimensions
 room installation,
 Photo: Lary Seven

RIGHT
 Laura Kikauka "Glowing Pickle Shed (exterior detail)"
 Funny Farm West, Canada,
 1999, Dimensions building
 sized, Photo: Laura Kikauka





thing conjoined to the show, in some hidden system of wishes: wishes I repress now, retreating to a distance afrom which it is safe to inspect the reflection of Kikauka's work in the mirror of culture.



No place can beat the glut of knick-knacks at Niagara Falls except wholesale outlets of novelties, souvenirs, magic supplies and seasonal displays. Kikauka's installations can compete with any of these places for density of detail, and clearly lots of her supplies are the debris of low-class consumer culture, appropriated directly from such sources. She openly celebrates the artistry of the unknowns who've invented the ironic, punning, transgressive and generally bent stuff that ends up in her environments, who, as she says, are "just reflecting our waste culture world"—yet it is the often misbegotten efforts of amateur craftspeople that chiefly animate her:

LAURA: I really respect these people who are artists, but don't know it.

TONY: Like somebody who designed your "half a cup of coffee" that's a half of a cup?

LAURA: Yes, although perhaps they're not necessarily as much an artist as wanting to produce a consumer item that gets a giggle and brings them income, in that particular case. But even more, like, *bad crafts*, or *failure crafts*, where they give up on the project halfway through or whatever—a half-done paint-by-numbers, or a macramé owl—where they just stop at the eyes and the rest is all snarly string, and it's like "No! I can't finish it!" I did manage to collect a lot of macramé owls—there was over about a hundred.

As Kikauka's work refracts everyday people's decorative urges and aspirations, it assumes a comic register, fraught with conflicting impulses of sympathy, derision and wonder.

LAURA: The *failure objects*, the total chin-scratchers... Where did this come from? And Why, why, why, why? Were they serious when they did this? Like, no way. Yes way? All those unanswered questions.

Here is Kikauka's strongest link to the camp sensibility of Jack Smith and its traces in LA art—and the marker that separates her installations from the novelty shop.

The ruined hopes latent in the *failure object* provide Kikauka's work with a mantle of gentle irony that it shares, after all, with her souvenirs and commercial sight gags; and so the quirky mix of exploitative sarcasm and authentic empathy that fuels camp achieves legible expression for the general audience. Everything is bright, shiny, mixed, complex; maybe it's goofy kitsch, but nothing is ordinary or predictable. Everything has been altered, modified.

LAURA: "Kitsch" is the critic's surface reaction, of course (but also the fun factor). And if you're doing [what I'm doing] it's obvious you won't be taken so seriously in the art world.

TONY: Well, oddly, it seems to me that what you're doing has nothing to do with being kitschy. It's fascinating to me



that you seem to have been doing this kind of work earlier or at least around the same time as West Coast artists like Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley.

LAURA: Of course. [Laughs]

TONY: But your approach is not so literal as theirs. You invite the participant to have a kind of second-order experience, where he or she needs to ingest some broad horizon of the world through this lens—whereas they sort of ask for you to imagine a virtual or idealized individual as the site of the problem in their work. So I'm wondering about the way you fit *yourself* into the art world, and whether these are parallel tendencies.

LAURA: Well, really, I don't think about it too much, I must say.

In Kikauka's work, everything seems colour-matched, and, seeing it, I become conscious of how *sorted* all the objects are, according to sometimes domestic strategies, sometimes formal, sometimes incomprehensible. *Is this what she does all day?*, someone asks. *It looks kind of organized; she must be obsessive-compulsive.* Do I think so?

Kikauka's compact clutter of bizarre objects *is* sorted, in florid excess, within and by a warren of small room-icles and stacked cubical chambers, sizzling with all this tantalizing detail—the dialogical systems of similarity and difference unceasingly poised at the brink of wonder. A *pairing* or *grouping* always threatens to spurt from its own confines into some magically charged psychological sphere. I asked Laura about her organizational tactics.

TONY: Sorting. You do a lot of sorting.

LAURA: Never enough. Yes.

TONY: But your idea about sorting is different from what most people think of in relation to sorting.

LAURA: Right.

TONY: Can you give an example?

LAURA: Oh just a pile of messy hardware, for example; perhaps boxes of hardware at a yard sale, like nails and screws, eyehooks, that type of hardware—someone else's mess that they didn't want to deal with sorting. Or maybe someone's owl collection, or something.

TONY: So, OK, here's the stuff; now what?

LAURA: OK, well, you separate. "Lift and separate" [laughs]; separate themes in piles. So, of course, the owls can all stay together, and hardware you can separate into categories. Quite easy; they all have their place. I really enjoy that process! I could probably maybe even get hired to do it as a hobby income—to sort someone's mess! I really do enjoy sorting or making a type of order out of someone's chaos. OK, hardware, nuts and bolts, that's a bit straightforward, and they would probably have bins, and a garage they would keep them in—but something like the owl collection, or a bucket of red balls, or someone's contact lens collection—what are you going to do to file all of that? *The process*, I like. It's like fishing, meditative. You take time out, and while you're doing it, of course, ideas come to mind: what you can do with the objects—and they might accidentally fall onto something else, or be beside something that makes perfect sense, that they should *be together* and all that.

TONY: And this way of *relating things one to another* is in



some way the basic process of human intelligence, I think. Like how we recognize similarities.

LAURA: Yes, shapes, colours, forms; and the obvious way you can link things in visual perception. Visually. And you can throw in maybe some audio, as in a music collection, on top of that, and whoo! Now we're cooking with gas. And batteries.

TONY: The different senses do help. But out beyond that there is something funny going on. There's a very twisted thing that happens in your scheme of categorization, at a certain stage—I'm thinking of the first page of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where he famously quotes Borges' "certain Chinese encyclopedia," with an astonishing and completely incomprehensible roster of differences.

As I speak, I am looking at bins over our heads in Kikauka's workshop. The bins are labelled FATE, RAGE, PRETENTIOUS, CONFIDENT, INSPIRATION, DIVINE, WHATEVER, HOT, HAPPY, PLEASURE, WILD, WEIRD, CRAZY, SILLY, OBEY, SECURE and SUSPICIOUS. Nearby, shelves are marked BODY PARTS, MIXED, SMALL PEOPLE AND CHARACTERS ONE-OF-A-KIND, PURPLE, YELLOW, RED, BROWN, ORANGE, PINK...

Nothing is more fundamentally human than sorting. Sorting is the foundation of language—that system of similarities and differences, of measured approximations to sameness and the typological oppositions that define a category. It's not surprising, then, that a great amount of art has been built around systems of sameness and difference. Think Warhol, McCollum, Vera Molnar.

TONY: At the Power Plant there was a white room, way up on the third storey...a two-metre-by-two-metre-by-two-metre cubical space. But the fact that it was immersive and white

in this way, that all the objects have to do with *white*, suggests an *organizing principle*, a *sorting* notion. So there's a kind of red herring here...

LAURA: White herring.

TONY: Sorry, white herring, here that suggests that you're somehow subjecting the world around us to a kind of *formalist idiom*. But I don't see the work as really dealing with formalism in the way the artists of the 60s and 70s dealt with formal categories. Instead, somehow it seems to me that you are engaging with unconscious processes, in the way that advertising does, using these categories as systems of indirection to sort of *allow us to get in*. So we get in, we think we that we know everything suddenly, because everything's white. It simplifies. The scheme is then sort of like an *ooh* and *aah*; it's a moment of astonishment that seeps through the unconscious system, that preoccupies our conscious attention and allows a lot of unconscious processes to be enacted in much the way that advertising works, where formal systems (of speed of editing or engagement with colour or design) capture and occupy our conscious attention and fascinate us—in a literal sense of the word *fascinate*...

LAURA: The attention-grabbing factor.

TONY: Grabbing our attention—and then allow the intrusion of the action elements of the commercial advertising, or of your work, to operate on our unconscious processes. So we're engaging with our own structures of desire and intimacy and the internal processes that we are all engaged with at an unconscious level at every moment, because you are liberating that level of activity through this mechanism of a sorting or ordering principle.

What is the outcome of this encounter? What is the *character* of the experiential process that entangles the visitor?

TONY: We don't really have a *viewer* any more.

LAURA: Right.

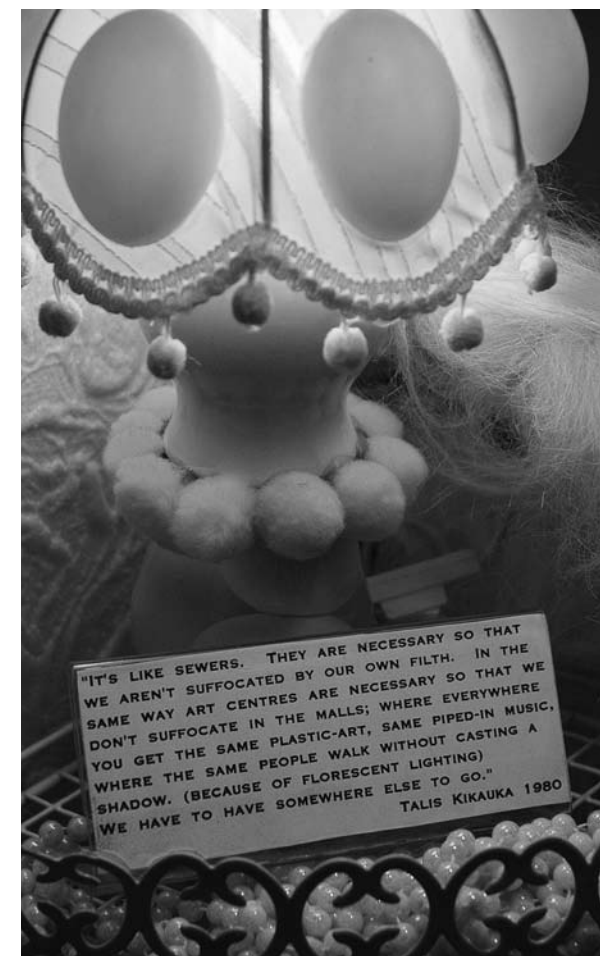
TONY: That's a crucial shift in this situation. It's not interactive, because "interactivity" suggests discrimination between the art object and the person coming to it, that somehow there's *me*, and then *I* interact with *something else*. Your kind of situation is more *immersive*. It's like going to the movies, in the sense that it *occupies you*. It goes into your space and you go into its space and the things merge. I wouldn't say that if I hadn't had the experience of seeing your work and becoming a part of it by translating the objects into mirth and the situations into personal states that then become a part of the exhibition.

LAURA: Yes, that's one of my favourite parts.

TONY: Yeah. So it's almost theatrical, in a special sense—it brings art into this unexpected realm where one might say the Living Theatre aspects of the art reach out and somehow, even with these inanimate objects, engage the participants directly.

LAURA: That's a really good point, because I also see it that way.

Immersive is not the right word; it does intimate that the encounter with Kikauka's installation is engaging, but it fails to suggest how. None of the tiny pieces that make up the show define its overall impression—instead, there is a cumulative effect that arises on its own from



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Laura Kikauka, "Too Good! Touch of Blue" Funny Farm West, Canada, 2006, Medium mixed, Dimensions room installation, Photo: Lary Seven

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Laura Kikauka "Red Room/Love Den" Funny Farm West, Canada, 2006, Medium mixed, Dimensions room installation, Photo: Lary Seven

LEFT
Laura Kikauka, "Organ Donor for Tiki" Funny Farm West, Canada, 2006, Medium mixed, Dimensions room installation, Photo: Lary Seven

RIGHT
Laura Kikauka "White Room (excerpt/detail)" at Power Plant, Toronto, 2005, Medium mixed, Dimensions room installation, Photo: Laura Kikauka

the composite of detail, immersion, doubled irony and sorting. Conditions like this, which seem to well up out of nothing, can be seen in terms of *emergence*. This is a novel aesthetic region, touched upon but not fully excavated in other work; it suggests that the *emergent* can be a quality whose kinship, in everyday experience, is with *personality*.

Until lately there has been no room for the term “emergence” in progressive discourse, largely because, like “intelligent design,” it has been identified with a conservative interpretation of evolution. In general, emergence originally applied to situations in which new properties appeared, apparently autonomously, in any complex interactive system. Then, in 1923, Conway Lloyd Morgan, one of the founders of animal psychology, tried to defend evolution by asserting that at successive stages of the evolution of life *something very special* happened, which he labelled with the term “emergent evolution”—clearly suggesting, as a compromise with religious fundamentalists, the possibility that there had been divine intervention.

Recently, however, the second-wave cybernetics of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and especially the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann have redeemed emergence from its veiled synonymy with the intelligent designer. Luhmann, for instance, defines a social system as the emergent structure that can arise between two self-referential systems, “conditioned by the complexity of the systems that make it possible *but that does not depend on this complexity’s being calculated or controlled*. We call this emergent order a social system.” [2] The hallmarks of this emergence are complexity, self-organization and self-reference, in bottom-up systems. Of course, the self-referential systems Luhmann refers to are living organisms, not artworks; yet in the way that Kikauka’s work “can survive the change of every single property and element in the system,” as Marjorie Levinson puts it, Kikauka and her work together function as a quasi-“autopoietic system.” [3] Repetition, reiteration and reinscription serve as quasi-reflexive surrogates for re-production.

The application of emergence to structures other than living systems has begun to appear under a wide range of circumstances. Steven Johnson comments that we have begun “building self-organizing systems into our software applications, our video games, our art, our music. We built emergent systems to recommend new books, recognize our voices, or find mates. For as long as complex organisms have been alive, they have lived under the laws of self-organization, but in recent years our day-to-day life has become overrun with artificial emergence.” [4] And autopoietic theory, Manfred Hentz observes, “is discussed in a lot of sciences (cybernetics, psychotherapy, linguistics, psychology, literature, law, social science, neurobiology, immunology, industrial management). Certainly, the autopoiesis is not a acknowledged theory, but a theory that is discussed everywhere.” [5]

The *sense* of emergence, of the singular quality that arises in the course of a visitor’s engagement with Kikauka’s show, has nothing less than the flavour of a personal meeting, an encounter with a *personality*. The complex system (that is, the exhibit) that interacts with

the observer expresses a (or *its*) “personality” in a way that *emerges* from the *plenitude* of her installation. Recognition—what we do to understand a *personality*—is a reflexive activity, a re-cognition. The association of *emergence* with *personality* relies on recognition, on the sifting of detail and a discernment of coherence that can assign overarching identity to the aggregate. Luhmann acknowledges the connection between social systems and personality, whenever two “participating systems create a transparency sufficient for reciprocal observation and communication. I have in mind concepts like person, intelligence, memory, and learning...‘Psychological’ considerations of this type belong to the emergent reality of social systems.” [6]

Certain types of knowledge arrive slowly, gradually accruing over a span of time: the sense one has of how to use a language, for example, that ineffable quality that lends each language, or even dialect, its distinctive personal flavour. One might even think of a language as itself having a *personality*—as might a profession, or a city. There are other things, too, that accrue slowly: like the deeper kind of love and true knowledge of another person. In fact, one might say that the experiential knowledge of another person, of another’s personality, is among the most complex pieces of knowledge that we are able to piece together. To speak of this slowly accrued experience as “knowledge,” though, raises another question: what kind of knowledge is it? What register of information, of testability, of inquiry, of utility or of veracity actually springs from, or even accompanies, this sort of knowledge? In the end, perhaps we have to assign it a category of its own—not an undervaluation, to be sure; more like a special place where such knowledge can reside with particular pertinence and poignan-



RIGHT
Laura Kikauka “It could be Wurst” Sausage Lamp, 2005, Medium mixed, Medium jar of sausages, electrical parts, 14” x 5”, Photo: Dr. Professor Armino Von Kink

cy, within the upper range of our experiential qualifiers, along with love and truth and need. So the emergence of *personality* takes time; it demands our sustained and attentive contact with its source, to establish the temporal range that the memory-formation for personality requires. Personality is a cardinal armature of memory *overall*—as is *place*. Also: our experience is fractured and filed according to an emergent system of indexical relationships, each commonly tied to persons, needs, love, relationships, times and places.

Here is a chain of linkages, through emergent personality, between Kikauka’s work and the visitor’s subjectivity:

Ironic detail
Emergent system
Reflexivity
Personality
Subjectivity

Guattari collapses this chain in his definition of *subjectivity* as: “The ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent, or in a delimiting relation, to an alterity that is itself subjective.” [7]

In other words, as Nicolas Bourriaud summarizes, Guattari’s *subjectivity* is “an evolving formation” that is defined only “by the presence of a second subjectivity...as the set of relations that are created between the individual and the vehicles of subjectivity he comes across, be they individual or collective, human or inhuman.” [8]

After an encounter with one of Kikauka’s installations, I find myself wondering how it diverges from the institutionalized interhuman relations of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. For Bourriaud, artists “involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together.” [9] But these artists’ “micro-utopias” and social exchanges are set against a background of institutional forms, such as dining, common recreational activities, marketing environments, and services. That Kikauka’s work does not “go there” does not condemn it as revisionist romanticism; the *products* she displays in her work, though they do not invoke a marketplace or service, nevertheless do serve (as in Pop art) to displace the perception of the artist as a creator. [10]

TONY: Is it accurate to say that your project has always tended to be something you’ve seen through the lens of different social institutions and their interconnectedness—institutions like the museum, store, home, farm—and the way that these become confused or conflated or blended in some way?

LAURA: No, it wasn’t really premeditated; you can only see that in retrospect, because at the time I had no idea—you’re just *doing things*, and it’s people’s reactions that make you realize that.

TONY: But this thing that Bourriaud calls relational aesthetics, a way of using institutional relationships as a basis

for making work (as in the case of an artist who might have an opening which is then actually a bar, or actually operating a bakery as an art project), is an approach that was completely unrecognized when you began doing your work—so it’s not surprising to hear you say that it was not premeditated. *Artists create these things*. And because this is a kind of work that Europeans began to herald only in the 90s, let me ask, when did all of this get underway? The Funny Farm originally came into being in Markdale in 1982 or so.

LAURA: I would say so; that would be around the time.
TONY: And it had all of these qualities, fully formed at that time, as I see it. There were all of the qualities of the museum—and the home, farm, workshop, lab, scientific investigation, electronic workshop, artisanship, laughfest, TV studio, store...

LAURA: Yes. But it was only a store by confusion; even the people in the town felt sorry for us, because they thought, *Oh, these poor people have a store out there and they’re not selling anything! Like, They don’t have their store hours out, how do they expect to survive?*

TONY: No prices.

LAURA: And it only hit me when people actually did stop in there to come shopping.



The personal *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, of aristocrats in the 16th century and later was a haphazard prototype of the modern museum. In fact, Sir Hans Sloane, the inventor of milk chocolate, founded the British Museum with the bequest in 1753 of his huge cabinet of curiosities. Notoriously, the objects collected by the owners of these cabinets of curiosities were assembled and sorted idiosyncratically—much like the objects in Kikauka’s work. The *Wunderkammer* functioned as a social spectacle; it was intended to dazzle, to impress. The *Wunderkammer* was a spectacle as Guy Debord has defined it: “Not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images...a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated...the present *model* of socially dominant life.” [11] This description of spectacle certainly fits Luhmann’s specification of a social system. But a Kikauka installation is *not* a *Wunderkammer*—because each object has been personally imprinted or contextualized by Kikauka, and consequently carries the imprint of irony that empowers its emergent character. Complementary to *dazzle* is the *incremental* experience of personality, which in this respect is *dazzle*’s binary opposite. That being said, the *fascination* that is necessary to capture and retain the visitor’s attention, as incremental emergence accumulates, demands sustained intrigue and *dazzle*, for which purpose *irony*, *formal devices* and *details* are the classic tools of hypnotists, storytellers and painters.

The conflation of *irony* and incremental emergence is found in certain novels; *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann, is a conspicuous example. Mann’s irony is an outlook, a *Weltansicht*—an oblique but sustained sense of humour that is incrementally emergent over the course of his novel. Detail and formal devices in paintings have long provided them with *dazzle*, which sometimes provides them, too, with the necessary groundwork for the emergence of personality. As Kikauka describes the rural

Ontario beginnings of her assemblage work and its relationship to the detail she found out there in “nature,” I find myself thinking of the fine detail in the baroque landscapes of Rubens and Poussin...

TONY: You mentioned that you drew a lot of inspiration from nature.

LAURA: Still do.

TONY: That’s a puzzling idea; can you explain?

LAURA: A lot of people ask, *Well, don’t you go crazy living with so much stuff all over the place, and all those stimuli?* And I think, *Well, not really!* There is always outdoors and nature...The amazing part is that nature has no void. You think, *Oh, how peaceful and serene*—but as soon as you go into the *details* there’s all these insects in colonies and interactions in an ongoing overload of information and stimuli in the details. And that’s what I like the most. It’s all in the *details*.

TONY: In this system of emergence that you establish, where things come up out of a miasma of detail and confusion, often there are other thematic principles at work, that have to do with intimacy; that have to do with shitting and sex and self-image.

LAURA: Oh my, was that in there?

TONY: You’ve done an enormous amount of modification and manipulation of things, like this camera here, covered with stickers and glitter.

LAURA: I do have a theory on equipment, especially high-tech or expensive ones, which is that the more you encrust it and personalize it the less likely it’s stolen, because it decreases the value. If you had a naked one, people could rip it off and just sell it—but as soon as it’s personalized they have a hard time.

TONY: It’s “de-productified;” it’s no longer a commodity.

Kikauka’s installations are less artworks designed as such and more just simple translations of her own living environments into public settings. Shortly after she left art school in Toronto, her gleeful decorating and her uninterrupted fascination with electronics, silicone glue, craft materials and gimmickry began progressively transmogrifying her domestic environment into a wonderland that she and her partner, composer Gordon Monahan, call the Funny Farm. It *is* extreme; it looks a great deal like her installations, and Kikauka knows it’s not the kind of living environment that would suit just anyone.

LAURA: In the case of the way I live—it’s a nice place to visit, but most people wouldn’t want to live there.

TONY: So—what’s your passion?

LAURA: Oh, there’s so many! Friends and family is an obvious passion. That’s the easiest one. Certainly not this thing about having a deliberate vision in the art world... ♦

Artist/musician/filmmaker Tony Conrad teaches in the Department of Media Study of the University at Buffalo. During the 1960s he was a participant in the founding of minimal music and structural film. Recently his Yellow Movies (1972–73) have been exhibited at the Green-Naftali and Daniel Buchholz galleries. His installation Beholden to Victory (1980–2007) opened in May at Overduin and Kite in L.A. His many recordings are released on the Table of the Elements label.

1. Charles Baudelaire, “A Philosophy of Toys,” in *Baudelaire: The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), 197.

2. Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems (Writing Science)*, trans. John Bednarz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 110. Emphasis in the original.

3. Marjorie Levinson, “Pre- and post-dialectical materialisms: modeling praxis without subjects and objects,” in *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity*, eds. W. Rasch and C. Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57–72.

4. Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 21.

5. Manfred Hentz, “Intra-Organizational Communication Based on Maturana’s Autopoietic System Theory,” in *Hierarchies of Communication: An Inter-institutional and International Symposium on Aspects of Communication on Different Scales and Levels*, eds. H. H. Diebner and L. Ramsay (Karlsruhe: ZKM: Center for Art and Media, 2003), 127.

6. Luhmann, *Social Systems (Writing Science)*, 110–11.

7. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9; also cited in Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 90–91.

8. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 91.

9. *Ibid.*, 43.

10. On the other hand, Pop art maintains a certain distance from the commercial world it iconizes, while Kikauka swims gleefully in an ocean of products, curiosities, hobby discards and trash, recycling what she calls “this gluttonous waste society.” And the way that Kikauka’s work engages its materials—her immersion in detail and the consequent overarching impression of *decorativeness*, of her materials being “just” decoration—distracts the visitor from any unifying impression of the overall assemblage as “the work.”

11. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Oakland: AK Press, 1977), 4–6.



LEFT
Laura Kikauka, “Bulblob”
Funny Farm East, Berlin,
2001, light box, 4’ x 2’, Photo:
Constance Hanna

RIGHT
Laura Kikauka “Pooped at
Funny Farm East” Berlin,
2000, Medium mixed,
Dimensions room
installation, Photo:
Constance Hanna

